

Utilization of library space for research and interactive learning: some reflections of Niigata University Library, Japan

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Abstract

Contemporary university libraries are trying to meet user demand and expectations through providing innovative services. Aiming current needs of users, Niigata University Central Library opened Learning Commons (LC) on April 2nd 2013, with vast and diverse services and facilities to support the teaching and learning needs of its undergraduates, postgraduates, staff, and researchers. Since the LC opened, regular usage statistics indicated a high traffic volume at the LC, however the library lacked qualitative data about user experience. Therefore, an assessment was conducted in spring 2014, to further evaluate user's perceptions and to identify areas for improvement. The paper discusses how LC impacts on students' life and provides future improvements for LC services and facilities. The study employed student survey using questionnaires and focused group discussions. 303 respondents who came to Learning Commons from 13th of May 2014 to 13th of July 2014 during the lunch time were selected as sample using purposive sampling method. The assessment collected qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and the qualitative data was coded and categorized manually. Focus group findings highlighted that the FLSALC (Foreign Language Student Aid Learning Corner) was the liveliest and best place among the LC services. Students spent much time in the LC for study and social purposes where they can integrate with other students freely. Being far from their families, LC became a common social area and best substitute space that provided a sense of belonging. Student survey revealed that the most popular activities students used in the LC were FLSALC, self-studying, meeting friends, using computers, doing research presentations and using discussion rooms. For the perception of importance, 80% of students rated LC as a whole as "very important" or "important". About 75% of respondents rated positive comments on how they looked upon LC as a flexible study place and social space. Further they mentioned LC has positive impact on the usage and perception on the library. Regarding future improvements of LC, about 45% of the respondents suggested weekly arranged activities such as career advising programs and counseling sessions, special talks and cultural exchange programs. About 55% of respondents suggested that rules for discussion rooms should be refined. Study findings concluded that majority of respondents have positive perceptions on LC services and facilities. Learning Commons has significant effects on meeting undergraduates' needs and provides academic support services. The assessment findings helped the library to make number of improvements in the LC services and facilities. The study carried beyond quantitative measures, and it combined with students experiences. This process may be useful for other libraries in assessment planning.

Keywords: *Learning Commons, User Service, Library Space, Niigata University, Japan*