

By

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Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria¹. May 2026**Abstract****Purpose:**

This study examined the adoption and adherence to the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) reference service standards in selected Federal University Libraries in North-East Nigeria. The study evaluated the effectiveness of reference service delivery based on compliance with globally recognized RUSA guidelines, particularly the visibility/approachability and reference search process standards. The study also explored how adherence to these standards could enhance users' perceptions and utilization of library reference services.

Design/Methodology/Approach:

The study employed a descriptive research design using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive assessment of reference service practices. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and interview schedules administered to professional librarians and postgraduate students in four selected Federal University Libraries in North-East Nigeria. The target population comprised 111 librarians and 1,459 postgraduate students, all of whom constituted the sample due to the manageable population size. The instruments were validated by experts using the Content Validity Ratio (CVR), while reliability was established through a pilot study conducted at the Federal University Wukari Library using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Data collected were analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

Findings:

The findings revealed varying levels of adherence to the RUSA reference service standards among the selected university libraries. While some libraries demonstrated satisfactory compliance with the visibility/approachability guidelines and reference search standards, gaps were identified in the consistency and quality of service delivery. The study further established that adherence to internationally recognized reference service standards contributes significantly to improved user satisfaction, effective information service delivery, and enhanced patron perception of library relevance and usability.

Implications:

The study underscores the need for continuous professional development, institutional support, and policy-driven implementation of standardized reference service practices in Nigerian university libraries. It highlights the importance of integrating globally accepted standards such as the RUSA guidelines into library operations to improve service quality, strengthen user engagement, and promote best practices in reference and information services. The findings also provide a framework for library administrators and policymakers seeking to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of reference services in academic libraries.

Originality:

This study contributes to the limited body of empirical literature on the evaluation of reference service effectiveness using RUSA standards within the Nigerian university library context. It provides valuable insights into the practical application of international reference service standards in North-East Nigerian Federal University Libraries and offers recommendations for improving compliance, service delivery, and user satisfaction in academic library environments.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, Reference Services, Reference Service Guidelines, RUSA Visibility/Approachability, RUSA Reference Standards, University Libraries

Introduction

The library's significance as a learning center in academic settings cannot be overemphasized. Since ancient times, the importance of the library's social and

intellectual functions in culture and society has been highlighted (Weise, 2004). The library is the center of scholarly operation within the university community, with the primary responsibility of supplying its patrons with reliable and valuable

information services. Institutional-wide programs that focus on research, information management systems and increasing researcher training and assistance are now being used by several university libraries. The apparent success of libraries in this function has enhanced their visibility and garnered them respect from high management (Research Information Network & Research Libraries UK, 2011).

To ensure reference librarians effectiveness and improve user-librarian interaction through reference services, the American Library Association's (ALA's) Reference User Services Association (RUSA) and the International Federation of Library Association's (IFLA) established standard regulations to ensure delivery of high-quality services (Shachaf, 2008). The RUSA guidelines are broadly grouped into five areas with specific standards that the reference librarians are expected to observe during in-person or virtual reference sessions. The first category of the RUSA standards deals with the visibility and approachability of the library reference service provider. The second category of the standards deals with the interpersonal attitude of the reference librarians towards the user of reference services. It states that a reference librarian should show objective interest in serving

the user with non-judgmental interest. The third group of standards addresses the reference librarian's obligation to listen and make probing inquiries to understand the user's concern better. RUSA's fourth category of the standards outlines how the search process should successfully retrieve the most relevant information resource. The last group of the standards addresses making follow-ups to establish whether the library user was satisfied with the services. RUSA initially published Guidelines for the Professional Behaviour of Reference and Information Service Providers in 1996 for conventional reference services, and then revised them in 2004 to include face to face and remote reference services. (Ward et al., 2004). The RUSA board approved the most recent version of the RUSA guideline in May 2013, and it can be obtained from the RUSA website (RUSA, 2020).

The Reference and User Service Association's (RUSA) Behavioral Performance Guidelines are generally established and are used to evaluate reference interactions. Azmi et al. (2017) compared the perceived significance and actual implementation of chat reference service standards among academic librarians. The survey instrument was developed using RUSA's Reference and Information Service's Behavioral

Performance. According to the research findings, most librarians placed a larger value on perceived significance than on real activities. The underlying discrepancy between the perceived importance of RUSA rules and the extent to which reference librarians practice them is important for identifying areas of development for reference services. The results may serve as an empirical standard for assessing reference services. From the forgone, there are similarities between previous studies as reviewed with the current study as regards the content of RUSA guideline required for adequate reference service provisions. This current study focuses on adherence to IFLA and RUSA guidelines expected from a reference librarian to effectively provide the required services and will be carried in Nigerian universities academic libraries.

There are several proponents of reference services standards in the library industry. Conformity to reference service standards has provided academic libraries with opportunity to enhance their service delivery. In the United States of America, a study by Maness et al. (2009) from the University of Denver describes procedures for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of digital reference services by highlighting service characteristics and developing new assessment metrics. The study shows that there are areas of professional behavior that are either not

adhered to by librarians in their transactions or are inadequately described in professional standards. The librarian is required to adhere to professional standards regardless of the patron's conduct. Whether or if these standards have been sufficiently adapted to virtual settings is a topic for additional investigation and debate. However, Nordin et al. (2012) noticed that not much analytical testing was done to assess such digital reference services, and a small attempt was made to evaluate the efficiency of digital reference services in an asynchronous format like ask a librarian, web form or online reference desk. In a similar study, Ronan et al., (2007) from the University of Florida, Gainesville, found that the majority of librarians and library employees contacted in their survey were welcoming and polite throughout online reference encounters, unfortunately, many failed to comply with essential aspects of the standards that promote more efficient reference interviews.

The majority of African countries lack awareness of and adherence to well-developed rules for adopting and effectively administering digital reference services (Younus, 2014). Behavioral guidelines have long been recognized as helpful in evaluating in-person reference and, more recently, virtual reference (Nilsen, 2005). In Ghana, a study by Luo

& Buer (2015) on Reference Service Evaluation at an African Academic Library: The User Perspective indicated that library patrons' impressions of the many aspects of their reference service experiences at the Information Help Desk are good. Respondents to the poll indicated a significant propensity to use the information help desk again and to suggest it to others. This is also supported by their proposal to extend information help desk services via longer hours, more personnel, and other sites.

Statement of the Problem

One of the most important services that every library or information center should provide is reference service. Reference service anchors upon a set of core functions, and inherent in the core functions are a collection of core values, including precision, accuracy, timeliness, authority, direction, access, individualization, and knowledge. These fundamental functions are usually guided by sets of globally recognized standards. The standards provide criteria for providing effective reference services and the application of these standards in reference service practice will lead to reference service effectiveness. However, despite the importance of the standards,

few records on reference service standards have used them as the basis for assessing reference service transactions, especially in Nigerian university libraries.

It is also uncertain if librarians who offer reference services follow these standards and how hard they work to put them into effect. Furthermore, investigations have shown that no significant study has been done on adherence to reference service standards in Nigerian libraries, particularly in Federal University Libraries in North East Nigeria. Hence, it is difficult for these libraries to determine if they have met the aims and objectives, they set out to accomplish using conventional and digital reference services. Additionally, it is difficult to ascertain whether these services are being offered properly, whether they are successful, and the challenges that librarians have in delivering these services. As a result, it is important to conduct assessments of librarians' adherence to reference service standards to identify any present difficulties or weaknesses and to ensure that reference service operates properly at the selected institutions' libraries in North East Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. Determine the extent reference librarians provide warm reception

- to patrons to initiate a discussion in reference to their query
- ii. Find out the extent of reference librarians assisting customers in their search for information
- iii. Investigate the extent to which reference librarians assist patrons in the beginning stages of their search
- iv. Evaluate the functionality of the reference desk for assisting users with information they seek
- v. Examine the extent reference librarians promptly address remote inquiries of users

Literature Review

Reference services are critical library functions in academic libraries because they establish a direct connection between the library and its patrons in order to meet their information needs. (Hussein & Mokhtar, 2018). Notably, reference service is an essential component for all forms of information centers and organizations. According to Buruga (2016), navigational assistance is critical in providing reference services since patrons are likely to have various challenges with evolving technology and search strategies. This navigational assistance provides fundamentally new tools that efficiently help the patrons to navigate the information system and environment. In this regard, RUSA released practical recommendations for reference service librarians to help enhance patron–reference

staff interaction for both online and in-person reference service (Shachaf & Horowitz, 2008). RUSA practical reference guideline was initially focused on traditional reference services when it was first released in 1996, and these guidelines were later modified in 2013 to incorporate recommendations for both remote and in-person reference services (RUSA, 2020). These standards, according to Maness et al. (2009) are now widely accepted and cited in professional literature, although it is certainly unlikely that adherence to these guidelines avoids or minimize interactions with improper behavior of patrons (which was not expressly intended to do), however, it might succeed in doing so in some instances. Additionally, RUSA standards noted, "the reference staff's good or negative behaviors (as perceived by the patron) have a major impact on the failure or success of the reference transaction". RUSA guidelines were adopted as the instrument for evaluating the reference librarians' performance in this study. Similarly, Platt and Benson (2010) noted that several previous researches on virtual reference interactions did not evaluate the interactions using the RUSA principles for reference and information services professionals' behavioral performance. However, in those studies that compared reference standards to the RUSA recommendations, the following are some

of their findings: Zhuo et al. (2006) conducted research at Central Missouri University on applying RUSA guidelines to review chat reference transcripts and discovered that the transcripts did not contain all of the behaviors outlined in the standards. Despite this, they deduced that all reference responses were appropriate and correct. The study also found that 90% of the responses were considered straightforward and succinct, and they specifically answered the client's question. The study is relevant to this study since both examine the implementation of RUSA criteria in the provision of reference services. This study is notably different in terms of locale, and it is focused on the application of RUSA and IFLA guidelines when providing reference services.

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive research design, which enabled the researcher to collect, analyze, and describe data about people, organizations, or phenomena.

The study population comprises 1459 postgraduate students in four selected Federal Universities in North East Nigeria. A total of 288 postgraduate students were selected through a proportionate random sampling method: $\mu \times n/s$. μ =population of each institute library, n =total required sample size, s =target. The study employed a closed-ended questionnaire for data

collection. Items were rated using five-point Likert scale; Strongly Agree (SA = 5) Agree (A = 4), Undecided (UD = 3), Disagree (D = 2) and Strongly Disagree (SD = 1). Content validity was determined using Lawshe's (1975) method thus: $CVR = ne - \frac{\sigma/2}{\sigma/2}$: CVR= content validity ratio, ne = number of experts indicating essential on an item, σ = total number of experts and $CRV=0.994 \approx 1$ was gained for the postgraduate students questionnaire. The internal consistency was determined as follows: $\alpha = \frac{k}{k-1} \left(1 - \frac{\sum s_y^2}{s_x^2} \right)$; α = Cronbach Alpha, k = Number of items, $k-1$ = Number of items minus 1, $\sum s_y^2$ =Sum of the item variance, s_x^2 = Variance of the total score. The r coefficient $\alpha = 0.89$ showed that, the instrument appeared excellent and reliable for data collection. Frequency counts and percentages were used for data analysis while, chi-square was used to establish linear relationship on the extent of adherence to RUSA guidelines across respondents from the selected universities. Data was subjected to MS Excel 12 for data analysis results presented in tables.

RESULTS

Items of the questionnaires were administered to postgraduate students, which, 288 responded to the items out of 302 to indicate areas of successful

interaction with the information agents on RUSA guideline on visibility and approachability. Data collected was analyzed using frequency counts and percentages to answer the research questions outlined from the objective.

Perception of Postgraduate Students on Reference Librarians' Behavioral Performance in line with RUSA Guidelines for Visibility/Approachability

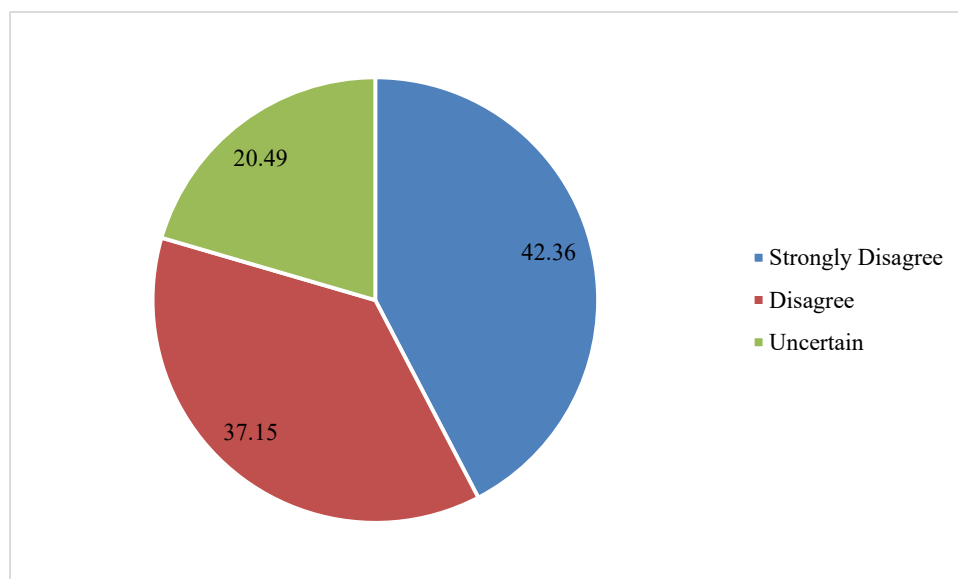
RUSA released practical recommendations according to Shachaf and Horowitz, (2008) for reference service librarians to help enhance patron–reference staff interaction for both online and in-person reference services. Item of the questionnaires were administered to postgraduate students, all

302 participants responded to the items of the questionnaire in order to indicate areas of successful interaction with the information agents on RUSA guideline on visibility and approachability. Data collected was analyzed using frequency counts and percentages to answer the research questions outlined from the objective while, chi-square at $p < 0.05$ was applied to establish statistically significant association of the mode of interaction between patrons and librarians across the selected universities, the results are presented in table 1.1. The users were asked to respond whether or not reference librarians' welcome patrons with a warm greeting to start a discussion when visiting the library seeking for information. The following responses were obtained and presented in figure 1.1.

Table 1: Perception of Postgraduate Students on whether Reference librarians' welcome patrons with a warm smile in the library in line with RUSA Guidelines for Visibility/Approachability

Items	MAU n=80				ATBU n=83				UNIMAID n=86				FUK n=53			
	A		U		A		U		A		U		A		U	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Reference librarians' welcome patrons with a warm greeting to start a discussion.	6	8	5	6	2	3	4	5	1	1	7	9	3	3	3	3
	0		0	3	4	0				8	4		8	9	0	3
															3	6
															2	4
															4	8
															1	1

Figure 1.1: Response Distribution on the reception of reference librarians



Assisting customers

The following responses were obtained and presented in figure 1.2.

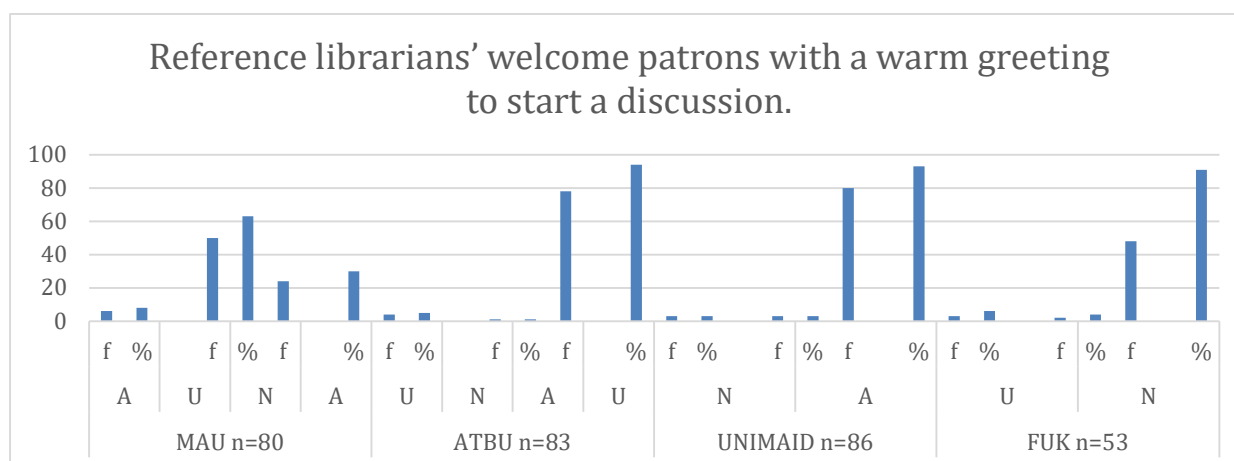


Figure 1.2 demonstrates, that none of the respondents confirmed reference librarians adhere to RUSA approachability guidelines during service delivery by welcoming patrons with a warm greeting to initiate a discussion while, some respondents (20.49%) did not attend to the items of the questionnaires. Most respondents (37.15%) confirmed that reference librarians provide reference services without complying with RUSA

approachability guideline of service delivery hence; reference librarians do not welcome patrons with a warm greeting to start a discussion. Lower levels of adherence to RUSA guidelines on approachability were seen in terms of greeting users cordially as indicated by majority (42.36%) of the respondents. The users were asked to respond whether reference librarians' walk around the reference or public areas, assisting

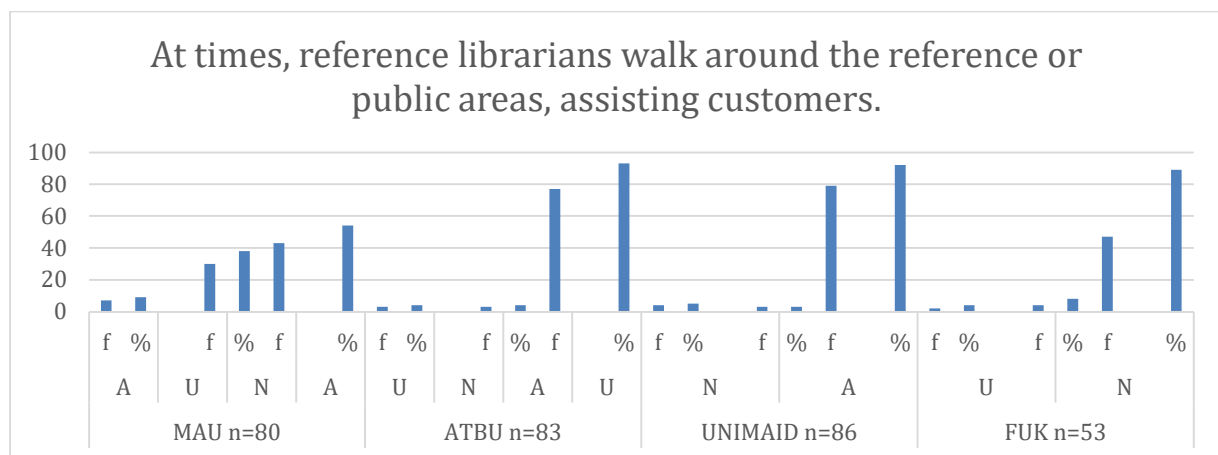
customers in line with RUSA Guidelines for Visibility/Approachability. The

following responses were obtained and presented in Table 2.

Table 1.2: Perception of Postgraduate Students on If At times, reference librarians walk around the reference or public areas, assisting customers in line with RUSA Guidelines for Visibility/Approachability

Items	MAU n=80						ATBU n=83						UNIMAID n=86						FUK n=53					
	A		U		N		A		U		N		A		U		N		A		U		N	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
At times, reference librarians walk around the reference or public areas, assisting customers.	7	9	3	3	4	5	3	4	3	4	7	9	4	5	3	3	7	9	2	4	4	8	4	8
			0	8	3	4					7	3					9	2					7	9

The following responses were obtained and presented in figure 2.



Few respondents (0.35%) were identified in the study to be in total support that they have been assisted severally by reference librarians through their constant moving around to identify users with difficulties in terms of identifying appropriate information. One respondent (0.35%) supported the above-mentioned functionality of reference librarians. Some respondents (14.58%) were neutral on the degree of adherence to RUSA approachability guidelines. Good number of respondents (32.64%) affirmed non-conformity of reference librarians to

RUSA approachability guidelines during service delivery by not roving around the reference or public areas and assisting customers while, nearly all (52.08%) the respondents strongly affirmed non-compliance to RUSA guidelines that defined librarians roving around to provide necessary assistance to users in need.

Assistance at the beginning stages of their search

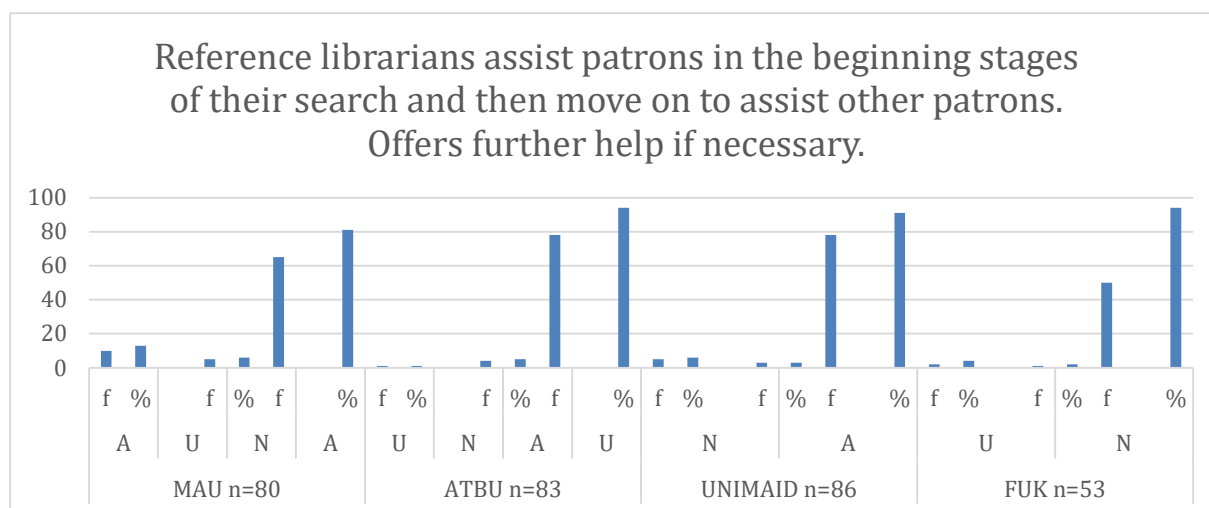
The users were asked to respond whether or not reference librarians assist patrons in the beginning stages of their search and

then move on to assist other patrons in the course of information service delivery to users. The following responses were obtained and presented in figure 1.3.

Table 1.3: Perception of Postgraduate Students on whether reference librarians assist patrons in the beginning stages of their search and then move on to assist other patrons in line with RUSA Guidelines for Visibility/Approachability. The following responses were obtained and presented in Table 1.3

Items	MAU n=80						ATBU n=83						UNIMAID n=86						FUK n=53					
	A		U		N		A		U		N		A		U		N		A		U		N	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Reference librarians assist patrons in the beginning stages of their search and then move on to assist other patrons. Offers further help if necessary.	1	1	5	6	6	8	1	1	4	5	7	9	5	6	3	3	7	9	2	4	1	2	5	9
	0	3			5	1					8	4					8	1					0	4

The following responses were obtained and presented in figure 1.3.



The result further indicated that few respondents (0.69%) agreed that reference librarians assist patrons at the beginning stages of their search and then move on to assist other patrons in conformity to RUSA approachability standards in service delivery. On the other hand, a smaller proportion (1.04%) was uncertain. In comparison, many respondents (37.50%) affirmed that reference librarians do not

adhere to RUSA approachability guidelines by not assisting patrons at the beginning stages of their search and then move on to assist other patrons and majority (60.76%) of the respondents strongly affirmed the aforementioned assertion.

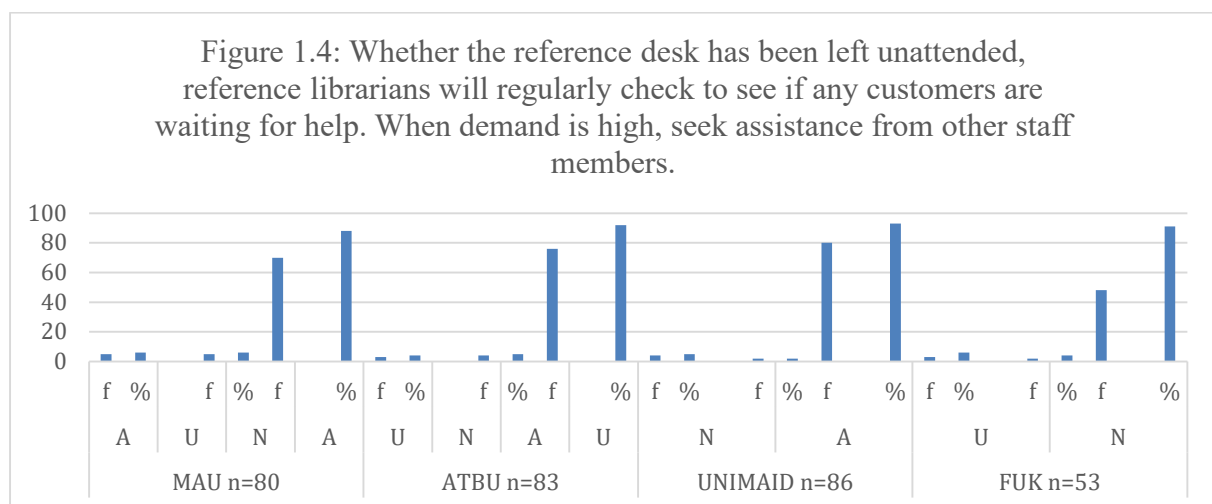
Functionality of the Reference Desk

The users were asked to respond whether or not the reference desk has been left unattended, reference librarians will

regularly check to see if patrons are waiting for help and, seek assistance from other staff members when demand is high.

Table 1.4.: Perception of Postgraduate Students on Whether the reference desk has been left unattended, reference librarians will regularly check in line with RUSA Guidelines for Visibility/Approachability

Items	MAU n=80						ATBU n=83						UNIMAID n=86						FUK n=53					
	A		U		N		A		U		N		A		U		N		A		U		N	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Whether the reference desk has been left unattended, reference librarians will regularly check to see if any customers are waiting for help. When demand is high, seek assistance from other staff members.	5	6	5	6	7	8	3	4	4	5	7	9	4	5	2	2	8	9	3	6	2	4	4	9
					0	8					6	2					0	3					8	1



The results further showed that a limited fraction of the respondents (0.35%) totally agreed that reference librarians adhere to RUSA approachability standards in service delivery by regularly checking whether the reference desk has been left unattended to establish if customers are waiting for help and seek assistance from other staff members when demand is high. Contrarily, a small proportion (3.13%) of the respondents were neither in agreement nor

disagreement with the level of adherence by librarians to RUSA approachability guidelines. Nearly all the respondents (55.56%) declared non-adherence of reference librarians to RUSA approachability guideline by not regularly checking whether the reference desk has been left unattended to see if customers are waiting for help and seek assistance from other staff members when demand is high.

This opinion of respondents is supported by many respondents and (40.97%).

Response to Remote Inquiries of Users

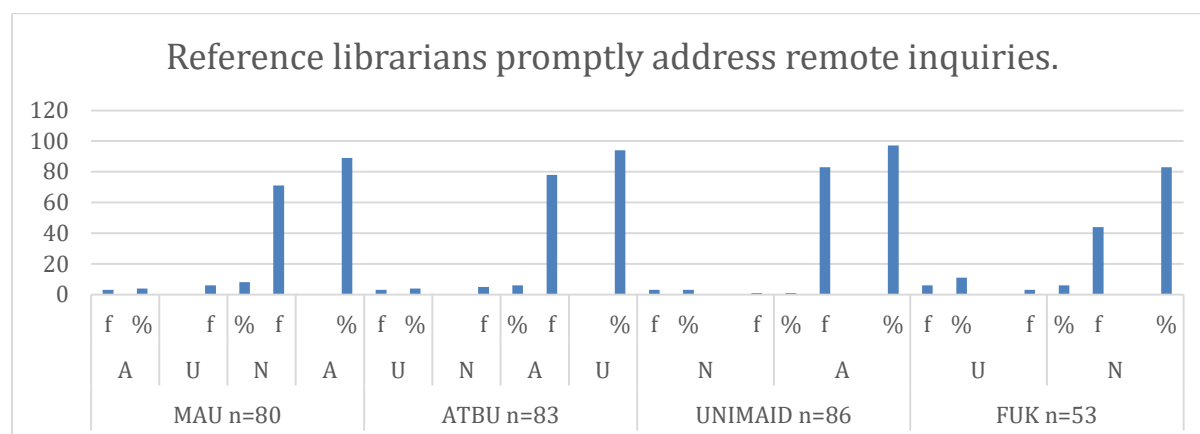
The users were asked to respond whether or not reference librarians' promptly

address remote inquiries in the course of information service delivery to users. The following responses were obtained and presented in figure 5.

Table 1.5: Perception of Postgraduate Students on How Reference librarians promptly address remote inquiries in line with RUSA Guidelines for Visibility/Approachability

Items	MAU n=80						ATBU n=83						UNIMAID n=86						FUK n=53					
	A		U		N		A		U		N		A		U		N		A		U		N	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Reference librarians promptly address remote inquiries.	3	4	6	8	7	8	3	4	5	6	7	9	3	3	1	1	8	9	6	1	3	6	4	8
					1	9					8	4					3	7			1		4	3

Figure 1.5



The result indicates that few respondents (2.43%) confirmed that reference librarians promptly address remote inquiries as outlined in RUSA approachability guideline in reference service delivery while, (1.74%) of the respondents were in solidarity with the above-mentioned assertion. Small numbers of respondents (2.08%) are neither in agreement nor disagreement with the level of compliance of reference librarians to RUSA approachability standards in service delivery. However,

almost all the respondents (52.43%) showed non-compliance to RUSA visibility and approachability guidelines by not promptly addressing remote inquiries during reference service delivery by reference librarians while a good number (41.32%) of respondents were in solidarity with the latter.

Discussion of findings

The selected university libraries' degree of compliance with the RUSA visibility and approachability guidelines was found to be inadequate. The study's conclusions

showed that reference services were provided similarly according to RUSA's visibility and approachability requirements. According to Shachaf and Horowitz (2008), RUSA published helpful guidelines for reference service librarians to improve the relationship between patrons and reference staff for both in-person and online reference services. The study found that most reference librarians in North East Nigeria adhere to RUSA criteria less closely while offering clients high-quality reference and information services suggesting that they adhere to RUSA criteria less closely while offering clients high-quality reference and information services. The survey supported the conclusions of Platt and Benson (2010), who found that the majority of libraries provide reference services in accordance with the intuition's library reference service policy and that not all reference librarians follow the RUSA Guideline particularly on visibility and approachability in service delivery. The kind of request on RUSA sets of rules determines the adherence to and guidelines expected of the reference librarian to apply (Bukar et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The RUSA Guidelines were used to evaluate librarians' adherence to the RUSA

guideline in the study. The study found that the level of reference librarians' adherence to the indicators of RUSA guidelines: Visibility and Approachability in service delivery appeared inadequate for global recognition. This means that users in the selected libraries are lacking in quality service delivery, as Librarians do not apply RUSA Visibility and Approachability essentials in providing quality references and user services.

Recommendations

Following the preceding summary and conclusion, the following recommendations for universities to improve adherence to reference service standards in service delivery in university libraries in northern Nigeria are provided.

1. Libraries should train their reference librarians to deliver excellent reference and information services to their patrons according to RUSA guidelines.
2. To boost patronage of the libraries' reference services, libraries should participate in more inventive reference service awareness campaigns.
3. In addition to providing suitable infrastructures, attention must be taken while selecting information resources to guarantee that all obtained materials will benefit consumers.

4. Training policies for librarians are essential to accommodate adherence to RUSA reference services standards in the training of librarians and information services professionals in universities. Universities must train librarians towards developing themselves as service providers rather than merely workers.
5. The government should invest more in the development of academic libraries and information centers by providing enough financing, allowing them to completely offer adequate reference and information services.

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