

FREE VS. FEE BASED LIBRARY SERVICES: SURVEY OF LIBRARY LEADERS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a study on the debate of free versus fee based library services in Pakistan. The review of literature revealed that no formal survey on this topic has been carried out before. A questionnaire based survey of selected experts in the field of library and information science from various cities was conducted. Their interviews were also audio-recorded. The library leaders opined on the arguments in favour of and against user fee in libraries. The results show that the respondents are in favour of user fee. However, they advocate for a core service to be offered free of charge as a basic right of the citizens.

Keywords: Free based library services; Fee based library services; Library charges; Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

The practice of charging fee for library services is as old as the libraries themselves. According to Savolainen (1993):

In the ancient and medieval libraries the safeguarding of collections was emphasized because handcopied books were treated as valuables. In order to ensure the return of borrowed books, in monastery libraries, deposits of money or other security were often required. In addition, academic libraries imposed different kinds of indirect charges. Similar practices could be found in some universities as late as the nineteenth century. In fact, these charges constituted only an insignificant part of the library's budget and their importance decreased when government began to support universities and their libraries more substantially (p. 323).

Mahmood, K, Hameed, A & Haider, S.J

Introduction of education and its expansion to all regions in industrial society in the West gave birth to the Public Library Movement in the nineteenth century. Libraries were totally funded by the government and the idea of free service was established. “The development toward free services contained, however, some exceptions to the general rule. For example, in Great Britain, some public libraries ... were compelled to gather voluntary users fees. ... In the United States several public libraries established rental collections containing primarily light fiction” (Savolainen, 1993, p. 323). After World War II libraries began to place copying machines in their premises and charged for photocopying. Computer-based information retrieval services were introduced in 1970s. Libraries were at that time the victims of serious budget cuts. So, they started to provide this service for charging fees.

FREE VERSUS FEE DEBATE

The question of whether users should be charged a fee for the use of library and information services has been debated vigorously since 1970s. It is a question that has engaged the attention of library and information professionals throughout the world. It is not coincidental that this period of time has also seen growth in the use of electronic information services. The opportunities offered by new services, and the need to find money to exploit them, have focused attention on user charges as a way of raising money. At the same time, the recession of the past years has blocked some other avenues for expanding budgets, as governments in various parts of the world trim back their public spending.

Philosophically, librarians never agreed with the idea of fee. Even the latest Unesco Public Library Manifesto (1994) states that the public library shall “in principle be free of charge. The public library is the responsibility of local and national authorities. It must be supported by specific legislation and financed by national and local governments.”

In the UK, the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act has forbidden all public library authorities to charge on services. However, the Library Charges (England and Wales) Regulations 1991 empowered library authorities to make charges specified in regulations. The regulations enabled charging for: reservation of, and damage to library materials; recovery of overdue lending materials; assistance in using information technology; undertaking research and information collation; provision of space for working or studying; and general use of library

Free Vs. Fee based Library Services: Survey of Library Leaders in Pakistan

accommodation for purposes other than library uses such as for meetings and office (De Almeida, 1997).

Weinland & McClure (1987) discuss different perspectives characterizing the controversy over fees for library services. They provide a justification for the perspective of selected user fees based upon the economic analysis of an indifference curve model. They argue that user fee will assist library administrators to survive in today's market driven economy.

Many authors give economic, legal, ethical, political, social, managerial and professional arguments in favour of, and against, fee based services in libraries. Arguments given by Cartmill (1992), Giacomini (1989), Murphy & Lin (1996), Myers (1993), Savolainen (1993), Stoakley (1977), and Waldhart & Bellardo (1979) are summarized below.

Arguments in favour of fee based services include:

- Fees limit the waste and over consumption of library services.
- With fees, the clients feel that they have acquired something that has value and is of high quality.
- Fees are justifiable because the results for using information will benefit individuals.
- The demand for fee based services is a measure of the necessity of library services. This will help the management for better planning for future needs.
- Fee based services are managed more efficiently. Competition will increase this efficiency.
- Increasing costs make user fees a necessity.
- With fees, many new services can be started.
- People pay user fee for a number of public services (e.g. parks, museums, bridges, highways) although they are tax supported. They should also pay for library and information services.
- If fees were not collected, some of the costly services would be abused and thus become a drain on the budget.

On the other hand, arguments against fee based services are:

- With fees, the tradition of free library service in any democratic society is damaged.
- Library services are a public commodity that is being financed through the taxpayers' money; fees in fact mean double taxation.

Mahmood, K, Hameed, A & Haider, S.J

- Fees cause inequalities vis-à-vis the users, for only those who can pay may use special services. This negates the equal access to information.
- Fees add marginal income in library budgets while libraries have to bear the cost of administering and costing fee.
- Fees have the long-term effect of reducing government support for libraries.
- Acquisition of materials will begin to be geared to those who can pay.

In Pakistan, most of the libraries are part of the education system. Usually, there is no trend for cost recovery in education. Public sector education is provided free or at a nominal charge. Kardar (1998) states that:

Tuition fees range from Rs.0.50 per month for primary education to a maximum of Rs.240 per month for those enrolled in institutions producing doctors. In Punjab, monthly tuition fees is a mere Rs.90 for a post-graduate student, Rs.240 per students enrolled in a medical college and just Rs.50 payable by a student attending an engineering course; which translate to a potential cost recovery rate of less than 1 per cent. These user charges are even lower in the NWFP and Balochistan. ... The amount of subsidy is the highest for the tertiary levels of education. ... These subsidies have also risen over time because cost recovery in the education sector has fallen from 12.7 percent in 1972-3 to 2.9 percent in 1992-3 (pp. 54-55).

Various Pakistani authors too, recommend cost recovery in education. Hasan (1998) says that the quality of higher education has dropped due to low cost recovery. "A much higher rate of cost recovery may help to improve the efficiency of both public and private sector institutions by increasing effective competition between the two which is sadly lacking at present" (p. 66). Kazi (1998) seconds this view by stating that:

One argument made to overcome the funding deficiency is that fees should be increased; and, of course part of the financial requirements should be met through fees. ... In a country like Pakistan, a case can be made for participation of parents and students (p. 265).

The draft public libraries act proposed by the Technical Working Group in 1984 imposed restrictions on charging for library services except for book reservation, fine for overdue, inter-library loan and making reproduction (photocopy, etc.). This draft was also submitted to the Punjab Secretary Education by the Director General Public Libraries in 1994 (Anwar, 1996).

Free Vs. Fee based Library Services: Survey of Library Leaders in Pakistan

Pakistani libraries are poorly funded. Their present funding does not adequately fulfill their needs. As a result the libraries present a dismal picture. Fee based services can be a good alternative to public funding but such services are not common in Pakistani libraries. No survey has been carried out with respect to fee-based library services in Pakistan. The lack of literature demands an empirical study on this topic. The aim of this study was to find out and analyze the opinions of library leaders about various arguments in favour of and against fee-based library services.

METHODOLOGY

This is a survey-based research. Opinions of library leaders in the country were tapped through interviews. A list of library leaders was prepared as sample for interview on the basis of the following criteria: a reasonable professional experience (at least 10 years); ensuring geographical representation of the country (all provinces and the federal capital); ensuring representation from various types of librarianship (public sector, private sector, library education, library administration, foreign mission/agencies); having high qualification in library and information science (Ph.D., M.Phil., master degree from abroad, master degree from a national university); having been on senior professional positions (serving or retired chief librarians/senior librarians of large libraries, chair persons of library schools, etc.); participation in professional activities (present or past office bearers of library associations); and professional contribution (authors of library literature).

Keeping in view the factors of time, energy and budget, a reasonable and manageable sample of 60 persons was selected. A letter requesting to participate as interviewee and an acceptance form was sent to the persons working/residing in eight cities of Pakistan (Lahore, Islamabad/Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Multan, Bahawalpur, Hyderabad, Karachi, and Quetta). Of 60 persons, 50 (83%) agreed to be interviewed, nine (15%) did not respond and one refused because of his ailment.

A questionnaire was constructed on the basis of the literature review. The questionnaire was supplemented by an audio-recorded interview. It was then sent to the participants a schedule of visit. The principal researcher visited respondents at their offices or homes according to the schedule, collected filled-in questionnaire, and interviewed them with the help of an audio tape recorder.

FINDINGS

The interviewees were asked to opine about various arguments in favour of and against charging fee for library services. A list of arguments (nine points for and six points against fee) was prepared. An open space was also provided to add some other points to the list. A 4-point Likert scale was used to get information about how important each statement was to the respondents. The reliability of the scale was high (Cronbach alpha=.72).

Tables 1 and 2 present ranked order mean scores of the responses on two types of arguments. It was found that among the arguments for fee, the statement ‘fee based services are managed more efficiently. ‘Competition will increase this efficiency’ was most important to the respondents (mean = 3.56). All other statements, although minutely different in statistics, are ‘moderately important.’ The cumulative mean for nine statements favouring fee for library services is 3.25 which shows that the respondents were a little more than moderately in favour of fee. Three persons responded to ‘other’ arguments in favour of fee. These are ‘elimination of non-serious readers’ (two responses) and ‘cost effective services will gain momentum.’

Table 1. Ranked Order Mean Score of Responses on Arguments in Favour of Fee

Rank	Statement for fee	Mean
1	Fee based services are managed more efficiently. Competition will increase this efficiency	3.56
2	The demand for fee based services is a measure of the necessity of library services. This will help the management for better planning for future needs	3.43
3	With fees, many new services can be started	3.37
4	If fees are not collected, some of the costly services would be abused and thus become a drain on the budget	3.24
5	People pay user fee for a number of public services although they are tax supported. They should also pay for library and information services	3.22
6	With fees, the clients feel that they have acquired something that has value and is of high quality	3.20
7	Increasing costs make user fees a necessity	3.15
8	Fee is justifiable because the results for using information will benefit individuals	3.09
9	Fees limit waste and over consumption of library services	2.81
	Total	3.25

Note. 1=Not important, 2=Less important, 3=Moderately important, 4=Most important

Free Vs. Fee based Library Services: Survey of Library Leaders in Pakistan

Although the respondents are in favour of fee but they also have significant considerations about arguments against fee (Table 2). The results show that the interviewees did not consider arguments against fee as much important as they considered arguments in favour of fee. Two of the six statements were ‘moderately important’ to them. The mean scores for these statements are closer to 3. These include ‘acquisition of materials will begin to be geared to those who can pay’ (mean = 2.83), and ‘fees cause inequalities vis-à-vis the users, for only those who can pay may use special services. This negates the equal access to information’ (Mean = 2.70). The other four statements were ‘less important’ to the respondents. The cumulative mean for all six statements against fee is 2.62 which may be interpreted as the people were a little less than moderately against fee. One of the respondents added another argument against fee by saying that ‘user community will be reduced.’

Table 2. Ranked Order Mean Score of Responses on Arguments Against Fee

Rank	Statement against fee	Mean
1	Acquisition of materials will begin to be geared to those who can pay	2.83
2	Fees cause inequalities vis-à-vis the users, for only those who can pay may use special services. This negates the equal access to information	2.70
3	Fees have the long-term effect of reducing govt. support for libraries	2.60
4	Fees add marginal income in library budgets while libraries have to bear the cost of administering and costing fee	2.59
5	With fees, the tradition of free library service in any democratic society is damaged	2.57
6	Library services are a public commodity that has already been financed through taxpayer money; fees in fact means double taxation	2.47
Total		2.62

Note. 1=Not important, 2=Less important, 3=Moderately important, 4=Most important

Further statistical procedures were used to test the significance of difference based on the arguments for and against fee based services in the perception of various groups of respondents. One of these procedures, analysis of variance (ANOVA), is a parsimonious and efficient statistical tool to explain the total variability by splitting it into variability between the groups and variability within the groups. If the variability between the groups is greater than the variability within groups the F-ratio (mean squares between groups divided by mean squares within group) becomes significant indicating a significant difference among groups. The significance level can be interpreted by referring it to the alpha level. If significance or p-value is less than alpha, the F-ratio is interpreted as significant. Once the results of the ANOVA

become significant, it necessitates the post hoc multiple comparison test to see the significant difference between all possible pairs. For this purpose the least significance difference (LSD) procedure was used in the analyses that follows.

The analysis of variance on the basis of categories of respondent shows that there is no differences of mean scores regarding opinions on statements for fee but in case of statements against fee a significant difference was found (Table 3). A post hoc multiple comparisons (LSD) show that private sector/foreign mission librarians' opinion against fee is different at .05 level of significance from the other two groups. The lower mean (1.95) shows that they were less against fee in libraries.

Table 3. ANOVA Table for Responses of Different Categories of Respondents on Arguments For and Against Fee

	Mean			F	Sig.
	Public sector librarian/library administrator	Public sector library educator	Private sector/foreign mission librarian		
Statements for fee	3.21	3.26	3.35	.20	.821
Statements against fee	2.75	2.77	1.95	4.74	.014*

Note. * Significant at .05 level

The difference in opinions of the two groups of respondents divided on the basis of their length of working experience was compared by using independent-samples t-test. It tests the mean difference of two groups. For this purpose respondents having less than 25 years experience were labeled as 'Less experienced' and others as 'More experienced.' The statistical analysis of opinions on the basis of less and more experience does not show any significant difference (Table 4).

Table 4. Results of T-test Regarding Opinions on Arguments For and Against Fee (by Experience)

	Mean		T	Sig.
	Less exp.	More exp.		
Statements for fee	3.22	3.27	.26	.79
Statements against fee	2.74	2.51	1.08	.29

Free Vs. Fee based Library Services: Survey of Library Leaders in Pakistan

Analysis of Audio-recorded Interviews

A large majority of interviewees favoured fee based services in libraries. Seven respondents recommended that fee could be charged on some services and not on all. Some basic services should be provided free of charge as the public right of the citizens. Similarly, library services should be provided free of cost to some deserving people who cannot pay. The major purpose of charging fee should be cost recovery.

Respondents favouring fees gave various arguments to strengthen their view. There is a trend of self-reliance all over the world. Without fees libraries are unable to acquire costly new information technology. Without fees resources are misused. Fees create a sense of responsibility in the users. Seven persons who disfavoured fees for library services also gave arguments. They were of the opinion that fees will reduce the use of libraries. Membership will be declined. Some said that library is a public institution and it should not become a commercial organization.

Some of the interviewees explained the response of library users toward fees. Four respondents stated that users do not resist fees. Another expressed that students happily pay fine for overdue books. Two respondents stated that although users cooperate on fee issue but higher authorities dislike fees for library services. Most of the interviewees who talked on this issue were of the opinion that people will resist fees in the beginning but this problem can be overcome later. Fees will be a new idea for them. So, they will have to be convinced and trained for payment.

CONCLUSION

Library experts in Pakistan are in favour of charging fees on library services. Although they showed their concern on the arguments against fees but this concern is weaker than the arguments in favour for fee. However, the library leaders advocate a core service to be offered free of charge as a basic right of the citizens. To overcome the problem of poor funding, library decision makers in Pakistan should try out fee based services. For this purpose market surveys for various types of libraries should be conducted. Training for library staff is also necessary to offer fee based services successfully. Library associations can play a vital role in promoting fee-based library services in the country. They can make their members aware of the benefits of such services and train them.

Mahmood, K, Hameed, A & Haider, S.J

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Free Vs. Fee based Library Services: Survey of Library Leaders in Pakistan

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