

***Voices from the Other Side: User Reports of  
New Zealand Library Reference Encounters***

— Pam Bidwell

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## **Abstract**

This research examines user satisfaction with the quality of reference service in New Zealand libraries, and reminds library staff of how it feels on the 'public' side of the library desk. It analyses the experiences of Open Polytechnic of New Zealand students asking reference questions in libraries, including whether users were given skills to research their own questions. A strongly positive or negative experience can be a powerful learning tool for library staff. Understanding what users feel went wrong provides important insights, making staff more empathetic when responding to information requests. The paper combines student comments with behavioural guidelines from the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) and key examples from international research. The research identified issues that inhibited appropriate responses, as well as useful strategies that were appreciated by users. Significant recommendations include Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) endorsement of RUSA guidelines, and the formation of a reference services special interest group. All libraries, particularly major reference libraries, should actively encourage staff awareness, library qualifications and training. Collaboration and information sharing should be encouraged, and could be assisted by a New Zealand-based reference discussion forum or web log. The active promotion of key staff as 'reference exemplars' who model good behaviours is a key recommendation. Libraries need to recognise the value of a checklist of essential elements for all reference encounters, and reference policies should include minimum standards for reference service that emphasise information literacy and user education.



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# Foreword

This study, *Voices from the Other Side*, will interest anyone who wants to know, from the users' perspective, what happens during the reference transaction in libraries. The study was conducted in libraries across New Zealand, and what strikes me most forcibly is the similarity in findings between this New Zealand study and the earlier *Library Visit* study undertaken in Canada.

The evidence is clear. When the library staff member looks bored or unapproachable, users don't ask reference questions in the first place. When the staff member does not conduct a reference interview, types into the online catalogue a few key words from the initial question, and silently hands over to the user a piece of paper listing a range of call numbers, the user's chances of finding a helpful answer are poor. When no follow-up is offered (e.g., 'Come back if this doesn't answer your question'), the staff member loses a key opportunity to repair a reference transaction that may have gone wrong. What makes these findings compelling is the cumulative power of the details provided by users about good and bad practices: what helped users in their search for information and what hindered them.

In her conclusion, Pam Bidwell comments on what she sees as a shift of emphasis in libraries from providing answers to providing user instruction with the goal of producing independent users. However, as this study makes clear, the best instruction happens in the context of helping the user through the steps of finding the specific information needed — it accompanies the reference transaction, but does not replace it. As one user said about a successful reference transaction that provided just-in-time instruction:

She offered suggestions & tried a new type of search on the computer catalogue with the screen turned so that I could see what she was doing — she talked me through what she did so I am confident I could repeat this on my own.

In the voices of users presented in this study, we hear stories of stellar reference help and we also hear horror stories of transactions gone wrong. We need to know both kinds of stories if the goal is to make reference service relevant in the twenty-first century.

Catherine Sheldrick Ross  
Professor and Dean  
The Faculty of Information and Media Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Canada



## Preface

Up until 2004, students enrolled in the course 72271 *User Education and Reference Skills* were set an assignment to report on a library visit, in which they asked a genuine reference question in a library of their choice and described what took place. When these assessments were graded, some significant differences were exposed — student descriptions could either impress *or* horrify, and the power of these descriptions to act as a warning to the library community became clear. Only a small number of markers on this course were in a position to get this bird's-eye view of New Zealand's libraries. Now you, the reader, have the opportunity to share that same experience.

A large number of direct quotations have been included in this paper, to reflect different aspects of the reference encounter. Four of these are sufficiently detailed to be useful for role-playing scenarios during reference interview training — particularly if combined with discussions about behaviour and possible improvements. The paper also makes a number of conclusions and recommendations that, if implemented, could see an excellent reference service develop for *all* New Zealanders.

This Working Paper has occupied too much of my leisure time for too long, so I offer this final version to you with some relief. It has been a guilty thought hovering above me, competing with teaching responsibilities, conference papers and journal articles — I even changed employers and left the country before it was complete. It was finally finished late one evening using a laptop on the kitchen table of my Koror apartment.

In spite of the years that have passed since this research took place, the issues and experiences are still of great interest. I hope their value is recognised and will assist in the development of a consistently high-quality reference service in all New Zealand libraries.

Pam Bidwell  
Instructor, Library and Information Services  
Palau Community College  
Republic of Palau  
August, 2007

# Introduction

How do New Zealand users feel about library services? Are they as satisfied as they seem to be from the glowing customer service reports that occasionally appear? This study probed the experiences of New Zealand library users in their encounters with library staff.

The Internet has had a profound effect on New Zealand libraries, affecting almost all aspects of many library operations — blurring the need for users to visit a library to use its resources, and indirectly reducing the likelihood of a librarian assisting with the location of information resources. However, throughout New Zealand library staff are still important intermediaries in the research activities of many library users. Diane Zabel, past President of the American Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), reported a decline in reference transactions since 1998 — anecdotal evidence suggests this is also the case in New Zealand. Zabel suggests that, with the Internet answering more straightforward needs, when users approach library staff their enquiries are more complex, require more time and reflect a stronger need for one-on-one consultations. Zabel contends that users value the expert help of librarians when the web does not provide an easy answer (2005, pp. 7–8).

Even if traditional face-to-face encounters between users and library staff are decreasing, they are still a fundamental element of library service — particularly in public libraries and in smaller centres. While superficial elements of the reference process have changed in recent years, many encounters still take place within the library and face to face. However, even when they involve use of the telephone, email or online chat, many fundamentals remain unchanged. In all these environments, the communication, behaviour and research skills of library staff are still very important.

This research examines the quality of reference service in New Zealand libraries, emphasising user satisfaction and whether users are happy to return to the same staff member in future. User perception of success is paramount within this research — studies show that while a library staff member may feel they have provided a good service, the user may not agree. It is argued that an understanding of what library users feel went wrong gives important insight for future interactions, making library staff more empathetic when responding to information requests.

An important aspect of this research was to establish what takes place during ‘typical’ reference encounters — to identify elements that users believe to be

helpful, as well as those issues that users felt had hindered the encounter in some way.

It is argued that when library staff do not know they are being observed, they are more likely to provide 'typical' or unstudied service to the user. Therefore, issues arising from these typical encounters can serve as a model for exemplary (or unacceptable) behaviours.

Unobtrusive testing of library reference services has taken place for more than 30 years. While initial studies focused on the accuracy of the answer, studies now attempt to analyse the entire transaction. A number of research studies examined the behaviour of library staff during the encounter, considering how this contributed to the success or otherwise of the encounter. While accuracy of any answer is still important, it is now only one of a number of variables under examination.

This study used two cohorts of students enrolled in the course 72271 *User Education and Reference Skills* at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. For an assignment the students were required to visit a library and ask a genuine question of library staff — significant differences emerged regarding the quality of the reference service offered. The assignment was based on studies undertaken by researchers Pat Dewdney and Catherine Sheldrick Ross. *Library Visit* is the name of their ongoing project in Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario. In that project, library students were instructed to think of a question that mattered to them personally, and to ask this in a library of their choice. Their first *Library Visit* study in 1992–1993 was followed by later work on the same theme, and provides valuable stories of library user experiences.

A strongly positive or negative experience has the potential to act as a powerful learning tool. While students demonstrated deep admiration for the librarians who performed well, they could be equally horrified when their experience was not as good as they felt it should be. The words of a Canadian library student from the first *Library Visit* study sums up this reaction:

I felt like dropping out of [library school]! I thought, if that is the experience that the general public gets, they can't be getting the books they want, because I didn't get anywhere near my subject. (Dewdney & Ross, 1994, p. 218)

Those marking the assignment had a bird's-eye view of what was going on within New Zealand libraries — student's descriptions both impressed and shocked, and their power to act as a warning to the library community became clear. The idea of finding out more about the behaviour of New Zealand library staff began to develop.

The driving force behind this research is the desire to establish the overall quality of reference service offered to users in New Zealand libraries. To achieve this, the experiences of library students during a library reference encounter were examined, in a library environment where they were not well known. It was hoped that the staff member would take the enquirer to be an ordinary user, allowing for a natural and unstudied response.

The study included a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) asking a combination of open-ended and closed questions. This was presented to students after they had completed an academic assessment based on their encounter. In some cases topics used by students are not identified, particularly where there is a risk that an unusual topic could identify the student concerned. One student expressed considerable concern about this issue, and this may explain the unwillingness of some students to be involved in the project.

Study participants were all students enrolled in the course *72271 User Education and Reference Skills* in semester one or semester two of 2003. All those who completed the second assessment were approached.

It should be made clear that students enrolled at The Open Polytechnic are not generally required to attend classes, but undertake study by distance from their homes throughout New Zealand. This meant that libraries around the country could be examined, allowing for an overall examination of the reference service offered to New Zealanders. In some cases students went outside their local area to conduct this research. This was most likely where they suspected that the unobtrusive nature of the exercise would be compromised — particularly when they worked in the library within their home town, or were regular users of that library.

The value of this research for academic teaching is quite profound, having the potential to positively affect the future behaviour of library staff — both the newly qualified, as well as experienced staff who have worked in the field for some time. The research serves as a valuable reminder to all library staff of what it feels like to be on the 'public' side of the library desk.

# Definitions

A **reference encounter** is the interaction between a library user and a library staff member concerning the user's information need. Many agree that an ideal reference encounter combines three elements:

- the reference interview
- direct assistance or suggestions to help identify the answer
- user education to familiarise users with library processes.

These elements are contained within the definition of a reference transaction (called an information contact) from the national standard for the United States developed by the National Information Standards Organization (2004):

. . . an information contact that involves the knowledge, use, recommendations, interpretation, or instruction in the use of one or more information sources by a member of the library staff.

The standard also notes the differences between this and a directional transaction:

. . . an information contact that does not involve knowledge, use, recommendation, interpretation, or instruction in the use of any information sources other than those that describe the library, such as schedules, floor plans, handbooks, and policy statements. Examples of directional transactions include giving instruction for locating, within the library, staff, library users, or physical features, and giving assistance of a non-bibliographical nature with machines.

Both definitions are used within the American Library Association, most notably by RUSA and the Association of Research Libraries.

A number of other similar definitions exist, including the United Kingdom's Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy definition of an inquiry, which is similar, and stresses the active involvement of staff (Sumsion, Marriott, & Pickering, 1995, p. 39). An Australian definition of a reference enquiry, derived from the Council of Australian State Libraries National Public Library database project (and amended by the Victorian Reference Librarians' Co-Operative), stresses assistance 'in the use of these resources' (Victorian Reference Librarians' Co-Operative, 2001).

One of the main aims of this research is to establish whether these elements are commonly present in New Zealand reference encounters.

A **reference interview** is the questioning process taking place between a library user and a library staff member concerning the user's information need. A more comprehensive definition is provided by *Library Visit* authors Ross, Nilsen and Dewdney in their book *Conducting the Reference Interview* (2002):

... a short face-to-face interview conducted for the purposes of finding out what the user really wants to know so that the staff member can match the user's question to the library's store of information. It is generally agreed that user's initial questions are often unclear or incomplete. The purpose of the interview is to elicit from the user sufficient information about the real need to enable the librarian to understand it enough to begin searching. The user's initial question often needs to be clarified, narrowed down, made more detailed, and contextualized. (pp. 3-4)

An earlier study by Lynch (1978) stressed the librarian as instigator of the questioning process. In her view, a reference interview has only occurred if the *librarian* has asked the user at least one question about their information need. This study uses Lynch's approach to establish whether an interview has occurred.

In today's busy library environment there is often a connection between a reference interview and the introduction of **user education**, to make users more self-sufficient in future. Olson (1984) defines user education as:

... the formal or informal instruction in the use of the library or information center and its resources ... designed to provide guidance and direction in the pursuit of information ... (p. 322)

Burton (1990) describes **proxy users**, and defines **unobtrusive library testing** as:

... based on the principle that library and information services staff should not be aware that they are being tested at the moment of dealing with an inquiry (although they may have been informed that testing would take place at some time). Questions are posed, either in person or by telephone, by 'proxies', who may play the role of a specific category of user (often a student). The answers to the inquiries have usually been determined by the survey team beforehand, thus providing an objective measure of accuracy. (pp. 203-204)

For this study students often chose a topic of personal interest, but the main focus was on the behaviour of library staff once the question had been asked.

It is increasingly common for users to receive advice on where a possible answer may be found, but then be left to make their own examination of likely resources. An **unmonitored referral** is considered to be:

... where the reference librarian gives the patron a call number or refers the patron to a source in the library thought to contain the answer but does not follow up or check to make sure that the source is not only found but actually answers the question. (Dewdney & Ross, 1994, p. 227)

This raises one final concept that can be used to avoid unmonitored referrals: **follow-up**. This occurs when a staff member checks back with the user to determine whether their suggestions helped to provide a 'healthy answer' (Ross & Nilsen, 2000, p. 150). When users report they haven't found what they were looking for, the use of follow-up questions allows library staff an opportunity to improve the final result by making further suggestions.



## Literature review

Appraising library services is by no means new — performance evaluations have taken place for many decades. Before 1971 these often involved user surveys, and results appeared very positive, as Crowley reported: ‘If anything, the literature of librarianship displayed a consensus that reference work was accomplished with amazing speed, accuracy and comprehensiveness’ (1985, p. 59). Like Crowley, Hults questioned the value of these results, speculating that ‘patrons were so happy with any service they seemed unable to make distinctions of quality’ (1992, p. 142). Murfin cites Young’s suggestion that the gratitude of users made them less able to make critical judgements on the quality of services they received (Young, cited in Murfin, 1995, p. 230).

In the majority of reference transactions, the user and the library staff member are the only participants. When users can be encouraged to think critically about the service they received, their feedback can identify details about both good and poor aspects of the encounter, to increase staff awareness of practices that either help or hinder reference encounters. Many writers endorse the value of directly surveying library users — for example: Murfin (1995, p. 231); D’Elia and Rodger (1996, p. 296); Durrance (1995); Massey-Burzio (1998, p. 208); Burgin and Hansel (1990); Goldhor (1979); and Bunge (1990, p. 42), who examined survey forms from both library staff and users.

## Unobtrusive testing

More than 30 years ago, the complacency of many libraries was rocked when the first unobtrusive library tests were published, showing that librarians were not performing as well as expected when answering questions from users. Terrence Crowley’s pioneering 1971 dissertation caused a stir when it was published along with similar research by Thomas Childers (Crowley & Childers, 1971). Previously, Crowley had been involved in a study with reference librarians who knew they were under observation. He speculated that this awareness might affect their attitudes and motivation, making results unrealistic (although even this early study revealed uneven performance). Unobtrusive testing, where staff were not aware they were being observed, was a research technique that had previously been applied within the social sciences, and Crowley chose this methodology to test his hypothesis.



The concept of unobtrusive testing revolves around the view that self-evaluation is not as impartial as an outsider's perspective. This issue was effectively highlighted in Radford's 1999 study of academic libraries, in a case where a student approached a librarian for help in finding psychology articles. The librarian took her to a computer and gave a brief demonstration on using the *PsychLit* database. After the encounter the librarian said:

I think it went all right from my viewpoint because I didn't have to really interact too much. She seemed capable; she seemed to know what she was doing. I felt she had found what she wanted because she said she had what she needed. She seemed to be capable of handling it on her own. (Radford, 1999, p. 4)

However, the student had a different reaction:

I felt like she couldn't help me on my subject. Isn't that she didn't know the answer, but I felt that she didn't want to [help] . . . she looked like she did not know what I was talking about, a blank stare and also almost like irritated. (Radford, 1999, p. 4)

Clearly, the two participants had very different expectations. The librarian's use of the words 'seemed' and 'felt' demonstrates a number of assumptions about the student's level of knowledge and understanding, while the student had not clearly indicated that she needed more assistance. The librarian was unaware of these issues, and it is only through Radford's questioning that the inadequacies of the encounter become clear.

Accuracy testing examined the correctness of answers given by library staff when the answer had already been determined, allowing for a comparison of the accuracy of library staff responses. These early studies are hereafter called *accuracy studies*. In more recent years, some tests have moved beyond an examination of simple accuracy to examining user satisfaction with the overall encounter — judged partly by customer willingness to return to the same staff member. These studies are hereafter referred to as *satisfaction studies*.

A range of unobtrusive test reports was examined for this research. However, only key articles on accuracy studies are discussed, as these are not the primary focus. Overall the study results showed that library staff consistently provided a correct answer in just over half of encounters examined. So consistent were these findings — regardless of the type of library — that the terms 'half-right reference' (Crowley, 1985), or '55 percent reference rule' (Hernon and McClure, 1986, p. 41) became widely accepted. While early studies focused on public libraries, similar results were also found in academic libraries.

A 1982 report by Weech and Goldhor provided some confirmation of Crowley's original suspicions. Their study compared obtrusive and unobtrusive testing

within the same library network, and found a 15% increase in successful answers when staff knew they were being tested. In their study, 70% of questions were answered correctly, even when staff did not know they were being tested (although it should be noted that head librarians within the library network were aware of the tests) (Weech and Goldhur, 1982, p. 318).

There has been only one published unobtrusive study of the accuracy of reference service within New Zealand libraries. Jan Thompson undertook testing at Auckland Public Library in 1987 — a somewhat controversial study, because the specific library system was clearly identified. The results were similar to those of other studies — only 56% of answers were entirely correct (Thompson, 1987).

## **Criticisms of accuracy tests**

Burton's 1990 review article discussed criticisms of accuracy studies. He identified three main issues (pp. 203–204):

- short factual reference enquiries may not represent the full range of reference encounters
- differences with the institutional philosophies regarding information provision are not acknowledged
- 'covert/overt instruction' within the reference interview was not taken into account.

Burton acknowledged that while there is more to a reference service than short factual questions, in some libraries these might form the majority of questions. However, he argued that failure to accurately answer these questions is not an effective measure of overall reference service quality, so that training following a reference assessment should focus on more than just improving accuracy. It is true that a simple test of accuracy may not clearly identify other training issues. When more information is available about the overall encounter, he argued that developing effective training would become more straightforward.

A more recent review by Hubbertz noted that many accuracy studies did not test uniformly — that is, the same questions were not always asked in different libraries. This was done to avoid library staff becoming suspicious that they were being tested, but it creates difficulties when comparing results. He argued that the use of questions that had already been identified (by pre-testing)

as more challenging made the 55% success rate almost inevitable. He also highlighted the difficulty of assessing the *reasons* behind incorrect responses. Like Burton, he felt that unobtrusive testing cannot effectively assess reference quality, but may have some value when comparing types of services — to identify appropriate areas for training (Hubbertz, 2005).

In their 2002 study of Californian libraries, Saxton and Richardson also challenged the 55% rule, contending that sample sizes for accuracy tests were too small, and the performance model too simplistic (p. 42). They argued that researchers had inconsistent definitions of reference service, focusing on simplistic statistical procedures to measure the reference interview, which is a complex social interaction. Their own study involved 9274 people and over 3500 genuine reference enquiries (Saxton & Richardson, 2002, pp. 74–75). It also provided some evidence that the type of questions asked in early reference studies did not represent the bulk of enquiries received — at least within the library system they examined.

While some questioned the ethics of testing without the knowledge of the librarian, Tyckoson (1992) provides an effective justification:

Unobtrusive evaluation attempts as much as possible to create a situation in which the evaluator receives the same response to factual questions as those received by any other patron in the library. (p. 157)

Other criticisms of accuracy tests point to the invasion of privacy and the artificial nature of the questions posted. Bailey (cited by Hults, 1992, p. 143) argued that:

. . . the point is that surreptitious observation eventually will uncover flaws in even a paragon of professionalism. Herson and McClure could have tailed the brightest reference librarians until they finally gave the wrong answers.

Hults replied simply: ‘The real point is that Herson and McClure didn’t do that. They tested librarians in their normal work situations, and librarians failed’ (p. 143).

Burton also pondered the ethics of observing staff without their knowledge, but hit back by questioning how ethical it is to provide incorrect information to users. Library staff, he noted, ‘. . . rarely know the consequence of the information that we provide . . .’ (1990, p. 210). He asked: ‘What if . . . library and information services were to *guarantee* 80, 90 or even 100 per cent accuracy in its answers? Why, indeed, do [they] not give such guarantees . . .?’ (p. 207).

Finally, Burton noted that accuracy studies are criticised for identifying the problem but failing to come up with an effective solution — *causes* of the failure

are not clear (1990, p. 211). For the reasons outlined above, some researchers changed focus and also began considering other aspects of the reference encounter. Some attempts at improving service did move beyond a focus on accuracy. One major step forward was the development of behavioural guidelines for effective reference service in 1996 (Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), 1996). The RUSA guidelines have been updated several times since then, with the latest update released in 2004 (RUSA, 2004). The guidelines provide valuable direction for library staff on best practices in reference encounters.

## Satisfaction studies

Even before this switch in focus, Crowley acknowledged that while the main focus in his studies was accuracy, ‘. . . it was hard to overlook the other information concerning the attitude, demeanor, and level of helpfulness among the library responders’ (1985, p. 61).

Some accuracy studies also considered other issues. Crowley reported Childers’ consideration of the skill of library staff at negotiating the question, and the appropriateness of referrals outside the library (Childers, quoted in Crowley, 1985, p. 62). Another early researcher, Jirjees, examined user views of staff attitudes — which is much closer to concepts of user satisfaction (Jirjee, quoted in Crowley, 1985, p. 62).

The Weech and Goldhor study included comments from proxy students on attitudes of the librarian and forms a bridge between the two forms of testing. Their proxies were asked: ‘Were you satisfied with the answer?’ and ‘Would you recommend this reference service to others?’ (1982, p. 315).

Durrance (1995) and Dewdney and Ross (1994) examined a wide range of issues within the reference encounter, using qualitative surveys that involved detailed user reports, allowing for an in-depth analysis. Their studies focused primarily on the *satisfaction* of the user with the overall encounter (satisfaction studies), and their willingness to return to the same librarian.

Do all questions have answers? Should it always be the library staff member who supplies an answer? Some writers note other possible outcomes. Dewdney and Ross point out that an accurate answer may still not satisfy the user — the information might be too difficult to understand, or arrive too late to be useful (1994, pp. 219–220). Durrance listed valid alternatives to providing the answer, such as instruction or assistance in problem solving (1995, p. 245). Murfin

described outcomes where users were shown how to find their own answers (1995, pp. 235–236).

Detailed user reports give library staff an opportunity to see the *consequences* of poor service. This style of research begins with proxy library visits, but detailed feedback can be obtained through user forms, focus group sessions, or even (as with the research in this study) from students' assessed work.

Generally, users in satisfaction studies are more than simple proxies asking predeveloped questions. The topic is often of their own choice, on a subject where they already have some knowledge. This allows them to assess both the research skills and the behaviour of staff. Murfin's 1995 study found 'non-factual' questions made up the majority of reference transactions in academic and public libraries (pp. 235–236) and this kind of question is indeed more common within satisfaction studies.

The enquirer is also often a student of information and library studies — arguably with stronger critical skills. This combination of evaluative skills and a greater knowledge of library operations may provide a stronger basis for assessing the overall service quality. Some criticisms of satisfaction studies suggest that proxy questioners may be overly critical. This is a genuine issue, but is less significant in qualitative research where results are not based on a simple statistical count, and can provide effective guidance on both good and poor practices.

It is this style of evaluation that is the main focus of the present study. Researchers such as Durrance (1989) focus on the effectiveness of the reference process — the interaction between the staff member and the user. Errors were not the primary interest, although the quality of the answer is still part of the user's assessment of overall satisfaction. Satisfaction studies can assess many aspects of the reference process, including the reference interview, search techniques and the general behaviour of the librarian.

The Durrance study also looked for evidence of professional skill — judging the status of the staff member based on their skills at interviewing and listening, effective search strategies and so on. The ability to put people at their ease was important, and failure to do this made people less inclined to return — even when the question was answered accurately. When willingness to return to the same staff member was the measure of success, Durrance found 63% of respondents considered their encounter successful. This is higher than success ratings based predominantly on accuracy, but still indicates significant problems (1989, p. 36).

The Durrance study is similar to Jardine's earlier obtrusive study of an academic library (where reference staff knew they were being evaluated). At the end of a reference encounter focusing on accuracy, users completed a short questionnaire examining behaviour and overall customer satisfaction. They reported an overall satisfaction rating of 99%, suggesting an uncritical evaluation, although 28% did not give the highest satisfaction ranking. One finding was that one-third of users were not encouraged to return if they needed more help, and another was librarians receiving low ratings for enthusiasm and self-confidence (Jardine, 1995).

Murfin's Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program compared staff and user reports of the same transaction, and found significant variations in perception of customer satisfaction. In academic libraries 70% of users and staff agreed that an answer had been found, with just slightly higher (74%) user/staff agreement in public libraries. Her unpublished study found that reference departments also rated their success levels higher than an independent assessment. Only one of seven academic libraries and one in four public libraries correctly rated themselves at 50% or below in accuracy. Murfin concluded: '. . . while feedback from the librarian is extremely useful for many purposes, the final judgment of success in finding what was wanted should come from the user' (1995, pp. 231–232).

Saxton and Richardson's 2002 study involved library staff who knew they were being tested, and included a range of reference process outcomes — utility, user satisfaction and accuracy (p. 2). Their large-scale assessment found a much higher rate of success: '. . . over 90% of the reference queries were judged to be completely accurate or partially accurate or provided the user with an accurate referral to another agency' (p. 95). While earlier literature suggests that an awareness of being tested makes success more likely, the authors included a number of extra variables in an attempt to counteract bias — including a user assessment of the encounter. However, reference enquiries were self-reported by library staff — an issue in an earlier study by Murfin, who noted that: 'It is . . . difficult to be objective in judging the outcome of one's own performance' (1995, p. 231). There is also a potential difficulty in completing the necessary forms within a busy reference environment. In Murfin's study, most forms were completed outside of desk time. At the only library where forms were completed at the end of each question, the comment was made that this interfered with reference service (Murfin & Bunge, 1984, p. 177). Forms completed some time after the event may be truncated or inaccurate. Saxton and Richardson acknowledged that forms were not completed for 15% of encounters. It is not possible to establish the reasons for this, but it is tempting to speculate that this may have occurred for the less successful encounters, and Saxton and Richardson did acknowledge this possibility.



Saxton and Richardson's critique of earlier studies speculated that reference librarians may not have been fully committed: '... at best, conducting the study was probably viewed as one more task being added to an already overburdening workload' (2002, p. 4). This could also be an issue in their own research, although the researchers did try to instil a sense of 'ownership' of the research among library staff.

Saxton and Richardson included a short questionnaire for the user, but it is not clear if this was linked to the librarian's report of the same encounter. As a result, there may be some difference of opinion between the librarian's and the user's perception of the real question, and also over the success of the encounter.

The Saxton and Richardson study was arguably ground-breaking in the scope and range of variables examined, and the research helped to establish that library staff who applied RUSA behavioural guidelines made a positive contribution to users finding the information they needed (Saxton & Richardson, 2002, p. 96). However, there are still limits to the information obtained from their research. The research relies on user reports that may not be sufficiently critical — as found in earlier studies. If there was an attempt to compare user perceptions of an individual encounter with the librarian's view of the same encounter, the report does not make this clear, and that would have been helpful.

The methodology of Dewdney and Ross' *Library Visit* studies was replicated in this New Zealand research. These ongoing studies began when teaching staff became struck by issues raised by students — accounts of disappointed students left a considerable impact. Notably, Dewdney and Ross highlighted a student's tale of being given books on flying a light aircraft when what was really wanted was information on jetlag. This exemplar of unhelpful behaviour was incorporated into the title of their first article: 'Flying a Light Aircraft: Reference Service Evaluation from a User's Viewpoint' (1994).

Dewdney and Ross used the methodology of unobtrusive testing. The query was on a topic the student had a genuine interest in exploring, and it was argued that this put students in a better position to judge success based on whether their needs had been met. A significant advantage was the '... finely grained and detailed evidence of the full range of experiences that affect the judgement of these users' (1994, p. 220).

Initially, findings from the first *Library Visit* study produced similar results when compared with accuracy studies. Out of 100 transactions examined over a

two-year period (1991–1993), 59% of students were willing to return to the same librarian — similar to rates for reference accuracy. As the authors noted:

It seems that no matter which outcome measure is used — accuracy, user satisfaction, or willingness to return — and no matter what type of library is observed, reference service is still not meeting the goals of effective information service in 40 to 45 percent of cases. (Ross & Nilsen, 2000, p. 149)

Lynda Baker and Judith Field (2000) used students in a core reference course to observe and report back on a reference encounter — similar to this New Zealand study. Their research was based on the Dewdney and Ross study, as well as the earlier article by Durrance, although the sample size was small. Baker and Field's study produced very similar results, with 58% of students expressing satisfaction with the encounter or willingness to return to the same staff member (results were not broken down into each category).

Dewdney and Ross sought to establish the most helpful and least helpful behaviours observed by the students. Although Dewdney had retired by the second phase of the study, Ross and Nilsen updated the research in 2000. As well as assessing whether there had been improvements in levels of satisfaction and willingness to return, they also wondered if the face of reference services had changed with widespread use of the Internet. They speculated that reference questions that had previously required considerable effort to unravel were now made much easier through the use of search engines such as Google, and queried whether this had impacted on real reference transactions (Ross & Nilsen, 2000).

An increasing number of New Zealanders are using the Internet to find answers to their information needs. However, it is still common for people to approach library staff for assistance. Although the *number* of reference transactions may be reducing in many libraries, Zabel found that the enquiries that do reach American reference desks are becoming increasingly complex (perhaps because the Internet has failed to provide an easy answer). Where the Internet fails to assist, Zabel suggests that people make a decision to seek out library staff, and anecdotal evidence suggests that this is also happening in New Zealand. Under this scenario, the user has exhausted their own research strategies, and expects more extensive research assistance from the librarian — more is required from library staff than simple directions to library resources. Zabel argues that these more complex enquiries require more time and a need for one-on-one consultation (2005, pp. 7–8), and this may also be the case within New Zealand libraries. It is therefore likely that library reference encounters will require the same skills of the reference interview and research assistance as in the past, and indeed a growing number may require increasingly skilled attention. The current study does allow for some examination of the Internet as a research tool.



In a more recent study, Nilsen (2004) looked at virtual reference transactions, but this is outside the scope of this paper. Findings from satisfaction studies (Dewdney & Ross, 1994; Durrance, 1995) are compared with those in this current study in the section examining qualitative results.

What is the role of formal library education in ensuring good reference practices? Head and Marcella (1993) speak for many library educators when they say:

Those of us involved in library education cannot be entirely free from blame for this sad situation, and it would be of great interest to know how many of the professional staff who featured in this survey had been our students! (p. 13)

They also added another benefit students receive from their involvement in research of this kind:

Perhaps it is only by participating in exercises such as this that students are able to fully appreciate the enquirer's point of view. Within the curriculum, rather than purely concentrating on their assumption of the role of the librarian, it might be of more lasting value if students were to assume rather more frequently the role of the user. (p. 13)

It is also true that library education must keep pace with the current issues facing library workplaces, to ensure that course content is as appropriate and valuable to library staff as possible. Burton (1990) acknowledged this quite a few years ago, and the issue continues today:

A major step towards improving the accuracy rate must come from the schools of library and information studies, who must recognize the new market in which library and information services operate and must select and educate students accordingly, not only in the use of information sources, but also in communication skills, in the role of information in the user's world, and in the techniques of asset maximization. (p. 119)

However, it is not just library educators who have a responsibility to ensure that staff develop and maintain their reference skills. Within the workplace, employers have a responsibility to provide ongoing training opportunities that emphasise the relevance of these skills within day-to-day reference interactions. Employers must recognise that their relationship with staff is ongoing and that their influence extends beyond that of educators, as noted by Gary Gorman (2004):

Educators have an opportunity to influence students for only a moment; managers have an opportunity to influence workers for an entire career.

Dewdney and Ross (1994) also point out the responsibility of individual library staff to make use of all opportunities for self-improvement, be they formal training opportunities or self-directed evaluation:

... the librarian needs to learn how to do problem solving rather than simply relying on habitual searching patterns that often involve an automatic response to check the library's catalog first. (p. 229)

Perhaps this is the real key to improving the results of reference encounters.

## Methodology

In 2002 permission was sought from Pat Dewdney and Catherine Sheldrick Ross from the University of Western Ontario to reproduce the research methodology from their *Library Visit* studies within New Zealand. As well as giving permission, Ross also shared survey questions (see Appendix 1) and background information concerning their research. In December 2002 the Ethics Committee of The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand approved the research proposal for use in New Zealand.

Dewdney and Ross' *Library Visit* studies used unobtrusive observation. The underlying justification for this approach is that people behave differently when they are aware they are being tested, and modify their actions, so that an encounter does not reflect normal behaviours. This research argues that staff who don't know they are being assessed are more likely to behave in a natural and normal way, allowing for a clearer and more accurate examination of the state of reference service.

This current study involved both quantitative and qualitative methodology. Students taking part were encouraged to complete a short questionnaire (see Appendix 1) about their encounter — most were short-answer questions that involved numerical counts, but the questionnaire also included two open-ended questions. The use of quantitative methodology provides a numerical summary of overall impressions. It allows for comparisons with other studies, and conveys an overall picture of reference service within New Zealand.

The answers to the open-ended questions were collated to obtain a collective view of student perceptions. However, in addition to the questionnaire, students could supply the text of their assignment, which documented their experiences in considerable detail. The use of qualitative methodology meant that individual encounters could be examined in depth. The major benefit of this approach is the increased level of information about each encounter, with issues emerging naturally. This form of analysis moves beyond the constraints imposed by preconceived questions and encourages spontaneous discussion.

Because this research combined both approaches, it is possible to build up a reasonably comprehensive picture of what occurs during reference encounters in many New Zealand libraries. Quantitative responses were examined using *SPSS* statistical software, while qualitative results were analysed using *NVivo* software.

Students asked a research question of a library staff member, based on a question they had previously developed, often on a topic where they already had some familiarity and knowledge (Dewdney & Ross, 1994, p. 220). In the New Zealand study, students were encouraged to examine the resources of the library to be sure that there was valid information available, and to ask a question that was general enough that the staff member would need to explore their request through a reference interview. Students were prepared to volunteer more information should any questioning take place. After the encounter, students completed an assignment on their experiences.

The most significant ethical issue identified was the need to ensure the anonymity of all those involved — individual libraries, library staff and students. As a result, a research assistant was employed to remove identifying details before passing responses to the researcher. The research intent was to examine trends within the results in order to identify useful insights for training, not to highlight problems with any specific library or staff.

The survey consisted of two sections — the first two questions were open-ended and solicited detailed written responses. There were six quantitative questions: four used a Likert scale rating responses from 1–7, another required yes/no answers, and one gave a limited choice of options.

Survey questions established the type of library, what the student wanted to find out, and how well the librarian understood what was really wanted. Important questions covered whether the answer given was helpful and met the student's needs, whether the student considered the librarian to be friendly or pleasant, and whether the overall experience was satisfactory or unsatisfactory. A final question asked students whether, if they had a choice, they would return to the same staff member with another question.

In the first semester the letter announcing the research (see Appendix 2) did not include a copy of the survey, as it was intended that responses be loaded electronically. However, the follow-up email provided a direct link to the online form. One reminder letter (see Appendix 3) was sent, including a printed copy of the form, with a reminder email to all students who had not submitted a response. A final attempt was made to encourage responses through a personal telephone call by the research assistant to the remaining students, while also asking students for their permission to view the electronic assessment. This request significantly increased the number of detailed responses.

The spread over two semesters allowed for an iterative approach. In semester two the initial letter also included a copy of the survey, and was sent as soon as assessments were received. The online survey form was amended to specifically

request the second task of their assignment — students could paste this into a textbox within the online survey, or grant permission for the research assistant to access electronically submitted assignments.

The electronic form was designed to encourage students to make full use of comments from their assessment, without the need to rewrite these on a printed form. It was felt that asking students to write out their comments would limit the amount of material we received. We found that even when students used the online form, many chose to keep their comments brief and did not supply the assignment task. Other students preferred a printed version of the form.

There is always a risk that students will feel stressed or obliged to take part, and to eliminate this as much as possible teaching staff were detached from the process of gathering responses. The original letter said:

This survey is completely voluntary and quite separate from your course activities. Whether or not you choose to participate in the study does not affect evaluation of your performance in this course in *any* way.

This separation was also emphasised in the reminder email — students were told instructors would not see any responses until identifying information had been stripped away. This was also stressed during follow-up telephone calls. Most students made it clear whether or not they wished to be involved, and no further contact was made if they declined to participate.

A number of reasons were given for lack of response, including pressure of work and study, technical problems and disinclination to complete surveys. One student expressed concern that there would be an impact on their final mark for the course if they did not participate, although they had been assured of anonymity. This issue is not easy to resolve, except by reassurance.

It should be noted that the nature of this research compromised the unobtrusive elements of the task, and students no longer undertake this task as an assessed activity.

## Study limitations

This was a voluntary survey with non-random selection. All 72271 *User Education and Reference Skills* students enrolled in 2003 who had completed the second assessment were invited to participate. While a self-selected convenience sample has less validity than a random selection, it was necessary to include all students in the research in order to obtain the greatest range of responses.

It is possible that students with either very good or very poor interactions might have been more inclined to participate than those who had a mediocre encounter, thus skewing the results to reflect the extremes of library service rather than an average encounter. Even if this does not represent all transactions, the response rate was sufficiently high that this is unlikely to be a significant issue.

In the first semester an unintentional bias was introduced because of delays in developing and testing the electronic form, so that students had already received their marked assessments before the survey was available. It is possible that markers' comments may have affected student responses — for example, students with lower marks may have decided not to participate.

Students were encouraged to visit different types of library, with the exception of school libraries (where the unobtrusive element is lost). Public libraries are the most accessible, but other library types, including academic, corporate and national, were all possibilities. The cost-cutting environment that is the reality for so many libraries means that it would not be unexpected for library staff to decline to help people outside their normal user groups. However, no students reported this, and there were examples where academic library staff gave assistance to non-students. Students living outside New Zealand at the time of the encounter were not actively pursued, and two responses involving overseas libraries were removed from the survey findings.

The free text nature of qualitative research offered considerable advantages over fixed responses such as Likert scale choices. However, in this form of qualitative research the researcher has no contact with the participants, so there is no opportunity to add new questions or to lead comments in a different direction. There was also no opportunity for clarifying comments, so claims had to be confirmed by a clear statement within the text. There were one or two examples where users made contradictory statements (for example, stating there was no reference interview and subsequently providing details of a questioning process). However, statements were generally consistent within their report, and obvious errors have not been used.

There are always issues surrounding replicated research, one of the most significant being the potential for problems with survey wording or methodology, and no wording was changed in this study. Wording changes could invalidate the original research intentions and limit the possibility of comparisons with the original research. However, there is a risk with question interpretation if terminology differs between countries. The library descriptions, for example, did not exactly match New Zealand, so that the term 'departmental academic libraries' may not have been clear to all students.

However, most survey questions were simple and unambiguous, with all possible answers covered. While the inability to restructure the survey to incorporate local conditions is a constraint, significant questions appear to have been answered carefully.

Nevertheless, there was some confusion about the meaning of the qualitative questions. The question: 'What specific kind of help did you want to get in response to your question?' may have been an issue with the original study, as the researchers had added a clarifying question in brackets: 'That is, what did you want to know or find out?' Responses to this question were quite limited, and some students indicated they weren't sure what was intended. This was significant enough that some clarification was provided to all students by email. The second question: 'What answer did you get to your reference question?' also caused confusion, and did not attract many detailed responses. As a result, these responses were used to supplement information from the detailed assignments, which provide the bulk of textual information concerning each encounter.

It should also be noted that these are the written words of students working within the confines of an *assessed* piece of work — unaware when writing their assignment that their words could be used for research. It is possible that some made adjustments to the content before submitting material to the research project. However, fundamentally these are the candid written experiences of students who interacted with New Zealand library staff.

There are some significant differences between the original *Library Visit* studies and this New Zealand study. In the Canadian studies, students complete the assignment in the first term of their programme (Ross & Nilsen, 2000, p. 149) and received clear instructions on the issues they were to consider. Their evaluation was prompted with predefined questions that they understood before they began their encounter, and they incorporated their answers into their assignment.



The reference course in the New Zealand study occurs at a later stage in the students' study programme, when more advanced tasks are appropriate. Open Polytechnic students were required to formulate at least six of their own questions to act as an evaluative instrument for their encounter, and the official survey questions (see Appendix 1) were supplied only after their assignment was submitted. As a result, there is a greater variety in the issues that students raise within their discussion, although there are similar recurring themes. This also means that there were some gaps within individual responses, where students did not tackle issues contained within the survey questions. However, given the nature of the exercise, it is likely that similar omissions occurred within the original Canadian study.

This research concentrates on clear indications that derived directly from students' words, rather than identifying gaps within their commentaries. Although this makes student commentaries more difficult to compare with Dewdney and Ross' (1994) Canadian studies, the diversity of the issues covered is still of considerable interest.

## **Use of students**

Students in all these studies are not yet fully trained librarians, and have a range of expectations about the service that may differ from those of the general public. Walters' (2003) criticism of general undergraduates is also valid for library students:

. . . the limited experiences of most undergraduates give them only a partial understanding of library collections and services . . . (p. 98)

Dewdney and Ross (1994) note that library students may have a higher expectation of being an equal partner in a reference encounter, and that the academic nature of the evaluation may influence student experiences, making them highly critical and in search of flaws (pp. 220, 225). Conversely, they also point out that library students are fundamentally more familiar with libraries, are more likely to persist, and may be more articulate than a real user. They even speculate that results from real encounters could be worse than those reported by students (p. 228). It is certainly likely that library students have a less naive view of libraries than the general public, and a greater awareness of services that should be offered. The unobtrusive nature of the study provides useful insights into how 'typical' reference encounters progress.



The likelihood that students may be more critical of the encounter does not negate the validity of their comments, and can be seen as an advantage of this approach. Actions that a general user may miss could have a significant effect on the outcome of the encounter, and these issues are worth documenting. It was also notable in the New Zealand study that many students tried hard to justify a particular action on the part of the librarian, often defending poor behaviour on the basis of the time of day or the presence of other users — with some even blaming themselves. Such comments do not suggest an overly critical reaction from students.

Library students are also educated library users — Durrance calls them trained observers, who are more sophisticated than the general public (1989, p. 32). Their observations may increase their awareness of common pitfalls within a reference encounter, and their feedback is valuable as the testimony of someone who has been treated as an average user.

In contrast, Tygett, Lawson and Weessies' study of an academic library used marketing students, who were felt to have a good understanding of the methodology. While this may be true, it is unclear whether they were sufficiently critical. Seventy-four per cent of the students considered their experience to be satisfactory or better (1996, p. 273), a result that does not reflect the norm in surveys of this type, and may be closer to the uncritical perspective of general customer surveys.

The acting abilities of any students may also have some bearing on the end result — a plainly uncomfortable user who seemed to be working to a script could arouse suspicions and interfere with an outcome. There was also an anecdotal report of students who arrived en masse at a library — the unobtrusive element may not have been complete in all cases. In Childers' doctoral study of accuracy, smaller libraries were dropped when the number of questions asked jeopardised the unobtrusive nature of the research (Crowley & Childers, 1971, p. 61). It is not possible to determine whether detection ever occurred in this study. However, New Zealand students were located around the entire country, and encounters occurred randomly over at least a 7-week period during two semesters. This made it less likely that libraries would become aware of a higher than usual number of questions, and reduced the likelihood of discovery. The results also suggest that in most cases the librarian's suspicions were not aroused (given the number of negative encounters reported), or at least not sufficiently to significantly affect behaviour.

Head, Marcella and Smith (1995) point out one more disadvantage with using students for this testing:

... the majority of the testers came from a distinct demographic group — that is they are young and do not appear particularly affluent — in contrast to service monitoring agencies who seek to ensure that their testers span a range of demographic groups. (p. 29)

Weech also suggests that a different level of service may be offered to users perceived as students (Weech & Goldhor, 1982, p. 319). Their age or appearance may increase expectations that they be self-sufficient and find their own answer, with library staff assuming more of an instructional role. However, Information and Library Studies students at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand have fewer shared characteristics. There is a wider range of ages than is common in many traditional face-to-face institutions, so this is less likely to be an issue.

Overall, the methodologies employed in this survey are robust and well tested. The results provide an insight into New Zealand reference services, and can be used to improve interactions in the future.

# Findings

## Numerical (quantitative) results

Over the two semesters 66 responses were received from a total of 116 eligible students — a final response rate of 56.9%. This is a very good return rate for a distance institution, where student participation in surveys is traditionally quite low.

Responses were usually made up of the survey questions plus some text from the assignment, but in some cases only the survey *or* the assignment was supplied. The response rate for both semesters for the survey alone was exactly 50% (58 of 116 possible responses).

In the first semester, 33 of 59 eligible students filled out the questionnaire (see Appendix 1), a response rate of 55.93%. Three students submitted their assignment but did not complete the questionnaire, making the overall response rate for the first semester 61.02% (36 of 59 students).

In the second semester, 25 of the 58 students (or 43.1%) responded to the questionnaire. A further five students agreed to the use of their assignments but did not take part in the survey, making an overall total of 30 responses for semester two, or 51.72%.

The original Dewdney and Ross study involved 77 transactions over an 18-month period (1992–1993). Comparing these results with the New Zealand study, there was a significantly higher response rate of 89.5% (Dewdney & Ross, 1994, p. 221). A later study from 1998–2000 examined 161 encounters (Ross & Nilsen, 2000, p. 149), but there is no detail of what proportion of students this involved.

A number of possible reasons exist for the lower response rate in New Zealand. This may have been partly because of the different stages of study for each group — Canadian students were involved in this research during one of their first courses, while Open Polytechnic students were at a more advanced stage. As a result, assignment tasks were more challenging, and a key requirement for the New Zealand students was to develop their own set of questions to evaluate the encounter. To avoid any risk of compromising their assignments, New Zealand students were supplied with the questionnaire only when the

encounter was over (although the published article from the original study was a key reading for the module).

In addition, all students in the Canadian study studied on campus. As a result their participation simply involved providing a second anonymous copy when submitting their work for marking. Ease of submission may have encouraged a high number of responses. In contrast, students at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand posted in their assignments or submitted them electronically, and there was no viable way of synchronising this process with survey responses. As New Zealand students were given details of the research only after *all* assignments had been submitted (to allow for extensions), this survey response is comparable to the traditionally lower response of postal surveys, and is quite high in this context. In some cases the assignment had been completed several weeks earlier (because students can work on assignments when it is convenient for them), which may have reduced the student's interest in participating.

The New Zealand results included a number of interesting findings. Public libraries were the most common choice — 63.8% of libraries chosen by students were large or central public libraries, and 25.9% small or branch libraries. The remaining 10.3% were general academic libraries. This is a lower proportion of visits to academic libraries compared with the original Canadian study, in which 31.6% were to academic libraries (Dewdney & Ross, 1994, p. 221).

Overall, the results reveal extremes of service — both good and bad strategies were exposed. There were no significant differences in the survey results between semester one and semester two, and results have therefore been reported as overall figures.

The main measure of success was a willingness to return to the same librarian with another question in future (Question 6). The New Zealand study results are significantly lower than the Canadian studies — in only 48.3% of cases were students willing to return (see Table 1). The first Canadian study in 1991–1993 had a success rate of 60%, rising to 69% in a later second phase (Ross & Nilsen, 2000, p. 149). The New Zealand results are also considerably lower than an earlier study by Durrance, which reported a 63% success rating (1989, p. 34).

This result was determined following the approach taken by the Canadian studies, which combined the 'Unsure' and 'No' responses. In exactly 50% of New Zealand encounters the transaction was reported as unsuccessful. Thirty-one per cent of students would not return to the same staff member with another question, and 19% were not sure (one student did not answer this question).

While there is an obvious conclusion that New Zealand librarians are not performing as well as their international compatriots, this is not the only conclusion. The lower success rate in New Zealand can be explained partly by the number of students opting not to take part in this research (43.1%). It is possible that some of these non-participating students may have had an unexceptional transaction — students saw more value in reporting the extremes of good or bad service and, given the small numbers involved, this may have affected the final result.

Table 2 shows that overall just over half (51.7%) of the library staff displayed some degree of friendliness (Question 3). Only one staff member out of the 59 encounters under examination was considered not at all friendly. Seven were thought to be very friendly.

A crucial question was whether at the end of the conversation students felt that the librarian had really understood what was required (Question 5). Table 3 shows that students felt the librarian had some understanding of their question in less than half (46.6%) of the encounters, and in only 15.5% of transactions did students feel that the librarian had *completely* understood their question. Conversely, a larger group of students (17.2%) concluded that the librarian had not understood their real need *at all*. Overall, some degree of confusion was reported in 43% of all encounters, and an additional 10.3% of students were undecided about the librarian's understanding of their needs.

Understanding is also clearly related to reports of helpfulness, or the quality of the answer given. Table 4 shows that 49.1% of answers given were not seen as helpful (Question 4). When a neutral category (neither helpful nor unhelpful) is added, the total percentage of answers that failed to meet students' needs rose to 59.6%.

Table 5 shows that, by the students' own ratings, just under one-quarter of all encounters (24.1%) were considered not at all satisfactory. A further 24.1% of students indicated they had some degree of dissatisfaction, and 13.8% were unsure or undecided. Just 12.1% of encounters were considered to be *very* satisfactory. Overall, the number of encounters considered satisfactory to some degree was just over one-third of all encounters (37.9%).

It is interesting to note that of the 48.2% of students who indicated they were not satisfied in Question 6 ('How satisfactory was your experience as a whole?'), some were still willing to return to the same staff member in future. Only 31% of students indicated that they would not return to that person with another question (Question 7), although a further 19% were undecided. This is in keeping with findings from Durrance, who found that some users 'forgave'

weak interviewing skills and inaccurate answers, but were less willing to return to staff who made them feel uncomfortable, did not appear interested, or were judgemental about the topic (1989, p. 35).

Although there are some clear trends within these survey findings, the difficulty in determining the reasons behind these failures would make many unwilling to accept the results uncritically. However, there is no doubt that these results indicate that there are significant issues with the quality of reference services provided in many New Zealand libraries, and a number of recommendations have been made concerning this later in the paper.

For more details on the reasons behind reference failures and successes, it is appropriate to turn now to the written responses from students that allow us to explore specific issues within some of these encounters.

## Qualitative analysis

This section analyses 61 detailed responses from students, using the qualitative software *NVivo* (version 2.0). Written responses ranged in length from between one or two lines of text to documents of 2000–3000 words. A very wide range of issues was covered, although three main themes emerged:

- staff behaviour
- questioning techniques
- search strategies.

Students commented on all stages of the encounter, and this allows an analysis of reference encounters beginning with initial welcoming behaviour, and ending with concluding comments and farewells.

Where there is a risk that an individual could be identified, details about the research topic have been removed from quotations. However, there are some examples where these details are necessary for understanding, but in all cases no identifying information is included beyond a simple response number.

Students reported that it was often difficult to determine the professional status of library staff. As a result, in this analysis library employees are consistently referred to as library staff members (although quotations that refer to librarians have been left unchanged). Library users have certain expectations of the service they receive, regardless of staff status, and it is the *consistency* of service that is a key point in the current study.

A wide range of variables determine success within a reference encounter, including some that are out of the direct control of library staff. Murfin discusses some of these: how busy the library is, staffing levels, and even books not on the shelf when needed (1995, p. 235). While these are important issues, this study looks at a range of variables that *are* within the control of individual staff members — particularly staff motivation, behaviour and communication skills, and their impact on reference encounters.

A number of key writers cover issues relevant to this analysis, and some key comments are incorporated — in particular from the *Library Visit* studies. The 2002 Saxton and Richardson study confirmed that RUSA guidelines (RUSA, 1996) are well recognised by many in the profession, and are accepted as a valuable standard for improving reference outcomes. As a result, core recommendations for effective reference service are included, to provide additional guidance.

An issue for anyone with experience of reference work is that in a real situation guidelines do not always work as expected. Guidelines are not rigid rules and can be adapted where necessary. This is particularly true with reference transactions, which are inherently dynamic, develop quickly and require prompt responses. Murfin rightly warns that behavioural guidelines should be used with care, and emphasises flexibility (1995, p. 233).



# Establishing a rapport

## Awareness

RUSA Guideline 1.2 (RUSA, 2004) discusses the importance of approachability — a reference librarian should be ‘. . . poised and ready to engage approaching patrons’. Users must be able to identify staff easily, and should feel comfortable in approaching them.

Guideline 1.2 further emphasises that ‘. . . the librarian is aware of the need to stop all other activities . . .’. Prompt attention is more likely when library staff look out for approaching users, even when working on other tasks. Ceasing those tasks when approached indicates that the user’s need is important. Student comments suggest that there is no real issue in working on other tasks when there are no users — as long as that task ceases when a user approaches:

The Librarian was writing but also scanning the room frequently and smiling to those walking past . . . I felt comfortable interrupting her as [she] had made eye contact and smiled. (Response 230)

. . . the librarian had just picked up the phone to call out. When she noticed me she cut off her call. (Response 253)

Conversely, failing to notice approaching users acts as a strong discouragement, and forced users to either wait or interrupt:

She would have been more approachable if she had looked up from her paper occasionally. . . . I received no response until I went right up to the desk and stood in front of her. (Response 47)

The task was clearly sufficiently intense to override an awareness of approaching users — suggesting that less intense tasks are preferable for deskwork. Even when a user is not noticed immediately, a simple apology can resolve the issue:

. . . the staff member was leaning against the back wall, facing away from me. I waited uncomfortably for a short time, not knowing whether I should try to attract her attention. When she noticed me, she greeted me with a smile and apologised for keeping me waiting. (Response 6)

It can be tempting to finish a pressing task before acknowledging a user — while the staff member knows that the task is urgent, this is not as clear to the



user, who may feel neglected. There were quite a few examples of this within the responses:

As I approached the desk the librarian was using her computer and did not acknowledge my arrival. . . . I waited for a couple of minutes, then coughed. . . . The librarian looked up and said 'I'll be with you in a minute' and turned back to the computer. After a few minutes, perhaps three or four she turned away from the computer. (Response 203)

## Greeting

Proactive behaviour was appreciated — for instance, approaching those appearing lost or confused, rather than waiting passively at a desk. RUSA Guideline 1.7 (RUSA, 2004) talks of 'roving' librarians who work away from the desk area — approaching users at their 'point of need', anywhere in the library. Several students in this study tried to look confused in the hope that a staff member would approach them. When this didn't happen they had to make the first approach, and some found this quite difficult:

No staff member had approached me while I wandered around looking lost and pretending to browse. . . . when leaving the library, a young female moving books on a trolley . . . made eye contact with me and gave a beautiful warm smile. I wished I'd seen her as I was coming in. I would have felt very comfortable asking for her help. (Response 49)

Behaviour that makes users feel comfortable in approaching staff is emphasised in RUSA Guidelines 1.4–1.6 (RUSA, 2004). These include a friendly smile and greeting to begin with, then maintaining good eye contact and listening attentively. Greetings are very important:

The Librarian I was referred to was also visible and made eye contact, but she gave me a lovely welcoming smile. I felt much happier about asking her my question and comfortable enough to sit down. I felt as if she was genuinely interested and wanted to help. (Response 225)

In contrast, an abrupt beginning can be very discouraging:

. . . the librarian was on the phone, she did not acknowledge [me] and . . . I had to wait a few minutes. When the call was over, she just looked over and said, 'Yes'. (Response 30)

### **Role-playing scenario 1:**

Using gestures without words can be equally off-putting, particularly when there are other issues with the encounter. In the following example, the staff member simply raised his eyebrows as the user approached, but said nothing. This unpromising beginning was compounded by inappropriate responses. The user had written down some journal names to be checked — the staff member risked offence with his first words:

What the hell does that first one say 'Pod Technology?' (Response 2)

While humour can put the user at ease, it must be used with care — the actual name of the journal was *Food* Technology. The student commented: 'While I found his attitude quite amusing, I'm sure most patrons would have found it offensive'. Further issues emerged once the student corrected the name:

Librarian: (Doesn't speak, types into computer for at least 2 minutes, sighs, taps pen on counter, makes clucking sounds with his tongue.) 'What else?'

Me: (I show him the second title.)

Librarian: 'You'll be lucky.' (Types in computer.) 'God, we have it! What else?'

Me: (I had a list of 5 journals but decide I have had enough.) That's all. (He seems pleased.)

Librarian: 'Where's your library card?' (I give it to him.) 'You have library fines to pay.' (I pay the 20 cent fine. He throws the card back at me and says nothing.)

Me: 'Where are the articles?'

Librarian: 'In the basement.'

Me: 'How do I get them?'

Librarian: 'Come back in about 15 minutes.' (Response 2)

Not only does the staff member assume that the user is familiar with library procedures — explanations are only provided after considerable prompting by the user.

Developing an effective rapport can increase user confidence, and showing an interest in the question encourages the user to expand. The 1985 Gers and Seward study involved 2400 questions in 22 library systems, and found that librarians who showed the least interest in the question were less likely to provide a correct answer (doing so in only 33% of cases). While judgement

about level of interest can only be subjective, the Gers and Seward study found only 14% of librarians were felt to have shown an interest in the question, but those staff who did show interest provided a correct answer 76% of the time (1985, p. 34). It takes a strong user to persevere in the face of a clear lack of interest:

She then said 'Hi' and looked at me, then looked back down to her work. . . . I then asked my question not knowing whether she was listening or not (as she was looking back at her work). (Response 266)

The 2004 RUSA guidelines acknowledge that not all enquiries provide a stimulating challenge for library staff, but emphasise that demonstrating interest in the question is part of an effective service. Useful strategies include facing the user, maintaining eye contact, nodding to show understanding and asking relevant questions (Guidelines 2.1–2.5). Omitting these can leave the user feeling very dissatisfied:

Her blunt statement that she 'knew nothing about the man' wasn't couched in a way that tried to show interest and build a rapport. It just made me feel that I was wasting her time and therefore I took the cue and ended it myself. (Response 253)

## **Queues**

Queues are almost inevitable in most library environments, particularly at traditionally busy times of the day. When it isn't possible to call on other staff for help, acknowledging those waiting and keeping them informed need not involve much time:

When she hung up she addressed a child who was waiting behind me, she was looking for 'an adults art section'. The librarian offered to help her 'in a minute'. (Response 221)

### **Role-playing scenario 2:**

When there are queues, RUSA Guideline 1.3 (RUSA, 2004) recommends 'question triage' — identifying uncomplicated queries that can be answered easily, allowing staff to focus on more complex questions. This can be tricky, and in the following encounter the staff member clearly felt torn between helping two people. To add to the dilemma, the enquiry developed in complexity, with clear opportunities for user education:

As she was about to begin the Internet search a man approached the desk. . . . She asked him what he wanted. He wanted a specific title. She asked him if he had checked the catalogue but when he said he didn't know how she looked it up for him. He did not know what the Dewey number meant or where it was. She ended up directing him where to go, then came back to me. Even though I could see her dilemma, it would have been better to have asked me if I minded her serving him first. That would have made it easier for her to have asked me later whether I'd mind if she took him to find the book. I felt a little abandoned as she broke off without explanation to help someone else, and I think she felt pressured to deal with him quickly. (Response 254)

This result may be a relatively frequent consequence of this approach, and reflects the dilemmas that library staff may encounter when trying to help more than one person at a time. There is no easy solution, but ignoring those who are waiting is no improvement.

When things became more involved, the librarian needed to call a halt — reassuring the second person that she would return to their questions once the first user's needs were met.

# Questioning: The reference interview

## Pre-interview

The impact of a busy work environment can affect the extent and quality of any questioning. There were reports of busy staff deflecting questions without confirming the details — this was discouraging, even when a referral was appropriate:

She was very busy doing something with books on a trolley, seemed mildly annoyed to be interrupted, didn't smile once, didn't ask me to sit down, and sent me to the children's area straight after I asked the question. (Response 225)

## Interview questions

To establish a user's real information needs it is often necessary to ask questions about the topic, and to listen attentively to the answers. The librarian usually instigates the questioning process, asking one or more questions concerning their query (Lynch, 1978). When coding responses in this study, a reference interview was deemed to have taken place when the *user* was asked one or more questions about their topic.

Gers and Seward (1985) found that the behaviour most strongly associated with a correct answer was:

. . . questioning the user to discover *specifically* what his/her question is. . . . The librarian who does not probe to the most specific level is likely to almost never provide a correct answer. (p. 33)

RUSA Guidelines 3.1–3.9 (RUSA, 2004) emphasise listening attentively without interruption and maintaining an appropriate tone of voice. Specific questioning techniques include:

- open-ended questions to encourage more detail
- closed questioning to confirm specific details
- restating the question to confirm understanding and to clarify issues.

It is also important that resources are selected at an appropriate level — this can be a problem when the person using the resources is not the one who has requested the information. This needs to be established during the reference interview, and can have a very positive impact:

Librarian C established my child's age so that he could recommend books that would appeal at the right level. He gave me time to look over what I had been given and invited me to come back if I wanted more help. (Response 17)

## Listening

The interview gives the user an opportunity to express their need clearly, but also requires the staff member to listen carefully to the discussion:

She . . . listened well and encouraged me to say more. . . she maintained eye contact without staring me down, nodded to indicate that she was hearing what I was saying, used pauses to encourage me to go on, and gave me time to elaborate on my initial question before starting her information search. (Response 218)

When it is clear that the staff member has not listened, the encounter can easily progress along the wrong track, or simply waste time:

I said that I had already done a search using those keywords and could not find anything that met my specific needs, but this obviously fell on deaf ears . . . (Response 18)

Obviously didn't pick up on the [specific topic] part of the sentence as she didn't refer to it again! . . . I did try and open the conversation up by adding that the content of the magazine was [specific topic] but this was another detail that she didn't appear to listen to. (Response 253)

## Partnership

Baker and Field argue that showing interest is important because of the ' . . . bond it created between the reference staff member and the student' (2000, p. 26). Partnering also helps the user feel included in the search process. RUSA guidelines also emphasise this — Guideline 4.1 (RUSA, 2004) encourages users to contribute ideas, and Guideline 4.6 encourages librarians to work with users to narrow or broaden the topic. Partnering values contributions from the user, who is able to work with the staff member to establish their needs — as a team, they are both involved in a search for appropriate resources:

Here are the titles of a couple of books that might be useful. (Points me to the right shelves.) 'And this is a reference I have found doing an Index NZ search. Have you found anything useful yourself?' (Response 2)

Librarian C accompanied me around the shelves, gauged my reaction to various books he suggested, provided alternatives when he saw my uncertainty and invited me to return for more help. I felt an equal partner in the process and was satisfied with the encounter. (Response 17)

Failing to involve the user can have the opposite result. In this example the user could see and understand what was taking place, but the librarian made no attempt to explain anything:

The librarian then proceeded to open up a search engine, then flicked from an Internet site, to the library catalogue, returned to the Internet and then back to the library catalogue. I asked her what she was doing and was met with silence. (Response 19)

## Clarifying the question

Clarifying what the user really wants helps to keep an encounter on track, and is usually possible even in the busiest of library environments. Repeating the question indicates that the librarian is listening, while rephrasing or summarising the real question helps eliminate misunderstandings. This relies on user confirmation of the topic before the search continues, and can be very effective:

. . . she had obviously listened to what I had said and questioned me to define my query and to determine what the information was for. The use of open questions encouraged me to expand on the subject and to provide her with more information about my need. Finally she did a brief summing up to ensure we were heading in the right direction. (Response 203)

Gers and Seward describe 'escalator' questions, where the librarian needs to establish the specific need by further questioning. They reported a higher degree of accuracy when the correct question was established (62%) and — more significantly — when the question was not specifically established, users never received a correct answer. (1985, p. 33)

## Interrupting

It may be tempting to interrupt if the user is taking a lot of time to explain what they need, particularly if there are other work demands. However, abrupt interruptions can limit the free flow of ideas, and inhibit the user from volunteering more information. Interrupting is often related to not listening carefully. Many students described encounters in which their comments were ignored or cut short through impatience:

When I, still flustered, tried to answer the assistant's question, she interrupted me several times attempting to guess what I was trying to say; finally she interrupted and said 'Look, what subject do you want?' and reeled off 4 or 5 options. (Response 6)

At this point the phone rang which she answered immediately without an 'excuse me' to me. It was a personal call. (Response 27)

## Avoiding an interview

It was reasonably common for students to report staff avoiding interviews, or conducting only a very limited interview. This reluctance is similar to findings from other studies — a study by Lynch (1978) found that 49% of reference transactions resulted in a reference interview — so no questions were asked by library staff in more than half of the encounters. Durrance (1995, p. 247) found that fewer than one in five staff members engaged in some form of question negotiation:

Librarian B's conversational style . . . made me feel included in the process. However her lack of questioning meant she misunderstood my need. (Response 17)

The assignment instructions for the New Zealand students encouraged them to read Dewdney and Ross' article 'Flying a Light Aircraft' (1994), which provides examples of staff taking questions at face value without a questioning process to establish the real need. To test this for their encounter, some students deliberately asked a broad general question that was sufficiently vague to encourage further questioning. At times this strategy worked well, and using standard reference interview techniques the real question was easily established:

I told him that I need information about grapes. 'Would that be grapes for wine?' he asked. I responded that it was table grapes . . . 'Could you tell me what aspect you are particularly interested in?' 'I'd like information about how to grow them,' I explained. Once he established that it was information about growing grapes as opposed to wine he offered the term 'horticulture', ruling out viticulture. He . . . continued . . . questioning until he knew what part of the [country] we were referring to. (Response 259)



## Taking questions at face value

In the 1978 Lynch study, 13% of the questions examined were defined as 'moving transactions' — that is, the query first presented was not the patron's true information need. The real figure may be even higher, as 51% of encounters within that study did not include a reference interview — the staff member simply *assumed* they understood the patron's true information need.

It is easy to assume too much about users' understanding of the duties of library staff. Durrance notes that many people may not know that libraries offer an information service (1989, p. 34). Users often felt they should work things out for themselves, and so posed general questions — expecting simply to be pointed to a relevant area. They felt that to ask for more than this would be unreasonable, as they were unaware that questioning could help to provide a more effective service.

Some students reported that their initial question was accepted without question. They felt that staff fixated on their original choices, so the enquiry quickly went off track:

I had decided to make my initial query a deliberately ambiguous one . . . I was disappointed to find that the librarian did not ask me any questions at all about the type of [topic], or the kind of information I required. The librarian assumed that I wanted information on [related topic] and immediately began searching the library catalogue. (Response 206)

In the following example, the request was for a very specific topic, but the term had an unusual spelling that was not clarified:

. . . without uttering another word, the librarian turned away from me to the computer terminal and started typing. I could see that she had miss-spelt [*sic*] [the topic]. She looked very confused and said 'no, we have nothing on that'. (Response 19)

## Mysterious manoeuvres

An unwelcome addition to this was the ‘without speaking, she began to type’ manoeuvre described so well by Dewdney and Ross (1994). This involves the librarian beginning some kind of activity (often typing into the library catalogue) without a word:

... as soon as they asked their initial question, the staff member, without speaking, started to perform some mysterious activity, without asking any questions or explaining what he or she was doing. (pp. 225–226)

Activities included walking away from the desk, looking through books or typing on a keyboard without any explanation:

Types into computer for about a minute without saying anything. I can’t see the screen but I keep leaning over trying to see what she is doing. (Response 2)

Users may not even understand that the librarian is doing something on their behalf. While these actions are not necessarily mysterious for library staff, they can appear as such to the bemused user, who simply sees that the staff member is turning away from them:

... the librarian twice took me to areas in the library without first inviting me to follow her to them. I did not know what was expected of me. On a third occasion when she walked away, I followed her, only to find that this time our interview had been concluded and the librarian was merely returning to the information counter. (Response 12)

During this survey nearly 20% of students (11 of 59, or 18.64%) reported no reference interview, and there were a number of examples of the ‘without speaking’ manoeuvre. While this research may not be entirely representative of reference transactions in New Zealand (students may have been more interested in taking part in this research if their encounter was inadequate), the numbers reported are significant enough to suggest that avoiding an interview may be common in some New Zealand libraries.

While the omission of a reference interview need not result in a failed encounter, it does seem to make failure more likely. In the following example the librarian did help find some useful information — seemingly more by chance than by good practice:

I deliberately asked a general question so the staff member could use different questioning techniques to clarify what specific information I was after. ... The monitor was turned towards her making it extremely difficult for me to read. She didn’t ask me anything about my question and made no effort to determine my specific need. Nor did she explain to me what she was doing or why. I was not included in the search in any way. Instead the staff member did a lot of muttering to herself under

her breath as she typed on the computer. This was not directed to me, at least I hope not as I couldn't hear or understand a word she said. (Response 23)

The initial question had been specific enough that, although the real question was never established, the user *was* taken to an area that did include relevant material.

Sometimes library staff use their initial search results as a partial reference interview. While this is not best practice, it can still give a good result, as in the following examples. The user had asked for information on ulcers, but there was no questioning to find out what kind of ulcers (the student suggested mouth, stomach, or leg ulcers):

Only then did she speak, still looking at the computer screen. 'We don't have much on ulcers. This is what we have. I went to the first title there. (Goes to the details screen again.) It covers ulcers and related areas. (Clicks back to the title list.) The next one is on stomach ulcers. Is that the sort of thing you are looking for?' She turned to make eye contact with me, the first time since my initial question. (Response 224)

In this second example, the user was able to see the screen, which meant they could intervene and correct a misunderstanding:

The Librarian presented results to me from the 1960s onwards (and continued to do so). She did not clarify the date range of [general topic] and only found the correct date range when I pointed to one of the search results on the computer and said that 'this data range looks right'. (Response 207)

While this intervention helped to 'repair' this encounter, this strategy relies too much on the user. An unconfident user, or one unfamiliar with library systems, may not intervene even when details are shown to them. This strategy can also limit the options under consideration. Nevertheless, examining the search results with the user can give useful clues, and helps to confirm that the search is on track. Where the user indicates that the resources are not helpful, more effective strategies can be developed.

## **Inadequate interviews**

When questioning stops too soon the real need may not be established. Inadequate interviews were generally the result of the staff member being too busy or preoccupied to go further, although sometimes staff simply didn't appear interested. This user's reaction may be quite common:

. . . as a customer I would tend to take the blame for an unsuccessful interview — I felt that I had asked a question that was too difficult. (Response 57)

Without a thorough questioning process there are many ways that a reference interview can go off track:

. . . so much discussion centred on what I had considered to be an initial question. I . . . was ready to volunteer more details about the use of the information . . .  
(Response 249)

She asked one question — ‘Is it the Middle Ages you are after?’ — which was basically what I had already said. . . . She asked no question that had not already been answered, so the whole ‘interview’ process was basically ignored.  
(Response 243)

Sometimes, even when the topic was clear, the staff member really didn’t seem to know where to go next:

She . . . asked, ‘What type of information are you looking for?’ Great, a good open question, I thought, this is going to go well. I explained I wanted information on how people with [the health topic] felt and some information on how the family can support them . . . and waited for the next question. She typed [the same words] again and, surprisingly, the same result appeared. (Response 47)

There is no doubt that complex questions can confuse or, as in this case, an unexpected aspect can make a question less straightforward. At such times the mind of even an experienced librarian can go blank, and the added pressure of a waiting user intensifies that reaction.

There are simple strategies to find out more in such situations. Clearly, it is helpful to continue the interview and establish what is already known about the topic or what has already been tried. Accompanying the user to look at encyclopaedias or books allows everyone to confirm their understanding. When details emerge, the user can be left to explore the general resources while the staff member talks to colleagues or searches in other resources out of eyeshot.

### **Role-playing scenario 3:**

#### *User intervention*

There were several examples in which it became clear that the staff member was not addressing the issues correctly, so the user intervened to bring the enquiry back on track. In the following example the user felt obliged to 'take over' the interview:

- Me: Do you have a music section here?
- Librarian: Do you mean CDs?
- Me: No. I'm looking for information about Celtic music.
- Librarian: Oh — You mean books then . . .
- Me: Yes — I'd like some information on the history of music in Ireland.
- Librarian: Oh . . . (pause)
- Me: Well, it's actually a person I'd like some information about.
- Librarian: . . . (said nothing)
- Me: He's called Turlough O'Carolan. He was a very famous harpist who wrote a lot of very popular Irish tunes, I'd like some information on his dates of birth and death.
- Librarian: How do you spell that?
- Me: O'Carolan.  
*Librarian turns here without explanation and types in to computer.*
- Librarian: No — nothing here . . . nothing at all.  
*The transaction really began to falter about here so I felt I needed to revive it.*
- Me: Oh . . . but if he's really famous . . . maybe something on the history of Irish music?  
*Librarian turns to keyboard again without explanation and types in another series of commands.*
- Librarian: There's not much here. I don't know . . . Oh . . . maybe . . . if I just go into stack and see . . .  
*Leaves without explanation and disappears out the back somewhere. After a couple of minutes she returns with a book on Irish music.*
- Librarian: You might find something in here.  
*She hands over the book and moves away. For her, obviously the transaction is completed. (Response 57)*

The user reported that there was some useful information, but it took some effort to find it: ‘. . . there was no mention of O’Carolan in the book’s index but there was a chapter on Irish harpists where I eventually found the information I needed’.

In this case the user’s perseverance probably exceeded that of many library users. As the student concluded, a ‘. . . “real” customer would probably not have found the answer’.

Sometimes staff did not pick even quite obvious hints:

She admitted that she didn’t know anything about the person, but as I had placed two books on the subject in front of her on the desk I thought she could at least have picked one up to have a look at. (Response 253)

In the first *Library Visit* study, 31.2% of users reported dealing with more than one librarian when trying to find an answer to their question. This may have been unintentional, where another staff member was present when they returned to the desk, or a deliberate action, when the user was not satisfied with the first staff member. Dewdney and Ross commented on this wasted effort (1994, p. 228). There are some disadvantages — Durrance (1989) reported frustrated users needing to repeat themselves. However, a failing encounter can be saved by the arrival of a second librarian with a different approach:

. . . returned to ask a second librarian the same question again because unsatisfied with first response. Second response actually found a book dedicated to the subject. (Response 10)

### **Role-playing scenario 4:**

#### *Abandoned interviews*

Even when a reference interview was conducted, there was sometimes obvious discomfort. This encounter started quite well, and had progressed to a demonstration of the library catalogue. But when the topic was established, the discussion stopped abruptly — leaving the user to interpret jargon that could have been confusing:

- Me: 'I'm looking for information on women's health.'
- Librarian: 'Sure (paused) health is over in the 600s. (Indicating behind her, she noticed me pause.) 'Do you know how to use our catalogue?'
- Me: 'No, I'm not familiar with this librar[y's] catalogue.'
- Librarian: (Standing up from behind the desk.) 'Come over here.' (She walked over to a cluster of computers and proceeded to show me the basics, not inquiring what my level of understanding was.)
- Librarian: 'You can type in what you are looking for under "keyword".' (She smiled at me, I must have looked puzzled.) 'Is there something particular in women's health you are looking for?'
- Me: 'Information on breast cancer actually.'
- Librarian: 'Oh . . . , use both words as your key words and use parenthesis.' (Noticed another woman at the desk and left. Moved on to speak [to] that woman and did not make contact with me again.) (Response 217)

## **Libraries — 'self-help' organisations?**

Sometimes the onus on searching is thrown back on to the user, based on a perception that libraries are 'self-help' organisations and that users should be self-sufficient. This expectation may be associated with a failure to conduct a reference interview. Durrance calls this a change from question *negotiation*, where an attempt has been made to establish the real need, to question *response* — directing people to resources that may or may not answer their questions (1995, p. 257).

This practice presupposes that users are confident in the use of library resources, and can leave them very poorly served. Durrance (1995) summarised the issues very effectively:

. . . librarians typically walk a questioner to a group of resources which they think will answer an initial question . . . Many librarians make it clear through words or actions that this is the extent of the help to be expected. (p. 247)

Many users absorb an underlying message — that it is inappropriate to approach staff for more help:

She looked at me as if to say, ‘What in the world are you talking about girl?’ Then she asked ‘What is it?’ and starts walking to the computer catalogue while leaving me standing there, without asking me if I would follow her. . . . We got to the computer and [she] pointed to it saying, ‘This is our catalogue have a browse . . .’ (Response 235)

Massey-Burzio raises this issue in her study of academic libraries, where self-help is a priority. She agrees with Buckland that self-service can be a mixed blessing: ‘It assumes standardized, intelligible procedures and presupposes some expertise on the user’s part’ (Buckland, cited in Massey-Burzio, 1998, p. 213). Massey-Burzio advises the profession to be aware of the self-service message that users are receiving, and to ‘soften it’.

Is this approach a result of a lack of policy directives? Ross and Dewdney (1994) feel that this may help to explain the practice they describe as:

. . . to accept the user’s question at face value, type a keyword into the computer, write down a few call numbers on a piece of paper, and pass the paper to the user without explanation or comment. (p. 265)

Many would agree that this behaviour is inadequate, yet this study shows that similar practices persist in New Zealand libraries today.

## **Negative closure**

An encounter can be terminated for any number of reasons, even without a satisfactory conclusion. Ross and Dewdney (1998) discuss ‘negative closure’ — using deliberate tactics to close the encounter prematurely. They link this to ‘reference burnout’, where the volume of questions overwhelms the staff member, and the standard approach becomes one of shifting responsibility for answering the question back to the user.



They list 10 possible strategies to achieve this. It can be as simple as directing users to a range of general resources and leaving them to search, leaving an unspoken implication that that is all the help that can be expected. Negative closure can also involve discouraging comments, such as a swift response that the library will not have any resources on the topic. One analogy is that of a tennis match — ‘to whack the ball back into the client’s court and hope that it stayed there’ (Miller, quoted in Ross & Dewdney, 1998, p. 153). Sometimes the desire to avoid further questions went to extremes:

I was on my way back to see where she was so I could ask her another question when I saw her coming out of the shelves where I thought she was shelving. The librarian saw me walking towards her and decided to go into the staff room. (Response 235)

## User education

Libraries are busy places, and often it is not possible to undertake research for the user — or a charge may apply where this service is offered. Users are often expected to be very independent.

It can be very liberating for staff to offer instruction on the use of library resources, and effective user education can create independent users, who can make excellent use of library resources without assistance. The practice is prevalent in many libraries today. However, when users are directed to a search tool such as the library catalogue, it is important to check that they are familiar with its features. If the existing knowledge of the user is taken for granted, they can be left floundering in an unfamiliar library, trying to use resources that seem bewildering:

She did not check my knowledge of Dewey call numbers, or the layout of the library; directing me to go 'upstairs' to another information desk. (Response 241)

The RUSA guidelines emphasise user instruction — particularly Guideline 4.9, which recommends offering ' . . . pointers, detailed search paths . . . and names of resources used to find the answer, so that patrons can learn to answer similar questions on their own' (RUSA, 2004). When instruction on use of library tools was offered, students were often very pleased with the result:

. . . she listened to me and showed me how to use the catalogue with a search I was not familiar with. She turned the screen towards me so we could both see and explained about the 'Global Keyword' search. We looked up a couple of search terms and dates and these were not very successful. But I now know how to use the catalogue better than I did before. (Response 258)

She explained that the query shouldn't take too long to fulfil and asked me if I wanted to find the information myself or if I'd like assistance. I opted for assistance. . . . I was pleased because the librarian involved me in the whole process of the search and retrieval. (Response 8)

However, when instruction is isolated and based around the functions of a specific tool (such as the library catalogue), the user may not be much better off. A more effective approach is to encourage an understanding of more general strategies. This follows the principles of information literacy — the American Library Association's Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989) provides a useful definition:

To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. Producing such a citizenry will require that schools and colleges

appreciate and integrate the concept of information literacy into their learning programs and that they play a leadership role in equipping individuals and institutions to take advantage of the opportunities inherent within the information society. Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand.

Since this definition was published, many standards have been developed for information literacy in different library settings — recognising that the concepts have a value outside the school and college libraries mentioned in 1989. Guidelines and standards relevant to New Zealand include the American Association of School Librarians and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology's *Information Power* (1998), and the Association of College & Research Libraries' *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000). Local publications include the *Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework* (Bundy, 2004) and the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) *Standards for New Zealand Public Libraries 2004*, which recognises information literacy within a section on lifelong learning.

Under the principles of information literacy, new skills need to be transferable for future research needs and useful for a variety of different topics and resources.

However, at times students in this study reported significant assumptions about the user's knowledge of the library layout or research tools. Rather than offering to assist, some staff clearly considered it was the user's responsibility to find information. This is inadequate if there has been no check to see if the user is familiar with library operations:

Me: 'What about other types of sources?'

Librarian: 'Um — I don't know. You could look on the Internet or in the library catalogue if you wanted (pointing to a terminal). There are some scientific magazines down the back. Come back if you want to order this item from Central you will need to quote this number.'

I was thus dismissed and left holding a piece of paper as her attention quickly moved to a patron who had just approached the desk. (Response 255)

Her last minute suggestion of Google as a 'good search engine', while useful would not have been so for someone who was not experienced in searching the internet. Throughout the interaction in fact the librarian made no effort to establish how au fait I was with using computers . . . (Response 253)

Checking the user's level of familiarity offers a valuable opportunity to provide instruction, increasing the user's future independence.

## **User guides**

It is clear that individual instruction involves considerable extra time and can be difficult to justify in a busy library environment. Some types of libraries (particularly academic, school and corporate libraries) can arrange group sessions — a more productive use of staff time. Where there are sufficient incentives for students or staff these can be well attended. However, public libraries can find it difficult to attract users to advertised sessions, and at busy times individual instruction may not always be feasible.

There is considerable value in developing generic instructional resources and directing users to these when necessary. While little mention was made of any prepared instructional resources in this study, this does not mean that they do not exist. However, it is intriguing to speculate on why these were not mentioned.

In public libraries, where organised user education sessions are not very common, instruction may be quite subtle; users may even be unaware that it is taking place. User education may be as simple as making sure the user is able to observe the computer screen while the staff member searches, or taking a user to the collection while also explaining the order in which books are shelved.

One risk associated with providing user education is that people may feel they are then expected to be independent for all their future research needs. In reality this is dependent on the extent of the instruction offered, and many users will still need help for specialised research.

## **User education and the reference interview**

Even when the focus is on instruction, the reference interview still has an important role to play. Students reported staff avoiding a reference interview by directing users to search tools without further questioning:

I had the feeling the librarian was not interested in my information need, and thought she had helped me sufficiently by showing me the basics of the catalogue and to then leave me to search on my own. There was no interest on her part of checking

specifically what I needed or reflecting the question back to me so I could clarify what I really required. (Response 217)

Establishing the specific need makes it more likely that users are pointed in the right direction. This also enhances opportunities for user instruction, such as tailoring the instruction to fit the topic and showing users how to use the most appropriate tools. Instruction in this context is more immediately meaningful; the user is able to apply their learning to address their current need, and is more likely to retain these skills for future needs:

She offered suggestions & tried a new type of search on the computer catalogue with the screen turned so that I could see what she was doing — she talked me through what she did so I am confident I could repeat this on my own. (Response 258)

When there is no reference interview, considerable time can be wasted on inappropriate resources. Ultimately, the user may leave the library without the information they need and with the underlying message that they cannot expect more help than this from library staff in future.

## **Assumptions**

Staff members who are guilty of assumptions about the level of knowledge of their users can derail an encounter, and examples of this are clear in some of the excerpts presented so far. A bold user can save the situation by indicating that they don't understand:

She decided to 'show' me, a bit reluctantly I thought as she had pointed out that I could access it on the library computers. This happened only when I looked questioningly at her . . . (Response 253)

Assuming that the user is familiar enough with library operations to understand what the librarian is doing can cause problems in many ways. Sudden changes can leave the user quite uncertain about what to do:

. . . after she had finished typing on her terminal . . . suddenly without saying anything took off through the library. . . . She offered no explanation as to why she was looking at titles in the drama section and . . . there was initially no explanation when she went back to her terminal (with me following behind). (Response 30)

Not all users have this degree of boldness — they may feel helpless and have insufficient experience to continue with their search. It is important to give users an opportunity to confess a lack of confidence or knowledge.

## Accompanying users — ‘pointers’ and ‘takers’

Baker divides reference staff into two categories: ‘pointers’ and ‘takers’ (2000, p. 25). Takers accompany the user and assist with the search, while pointers simply direct users to sections of the library. Although not stated explicitly, taking a user to the shelves is presented as superior to pointing them in the general direction of likely resources.

Murfin and Bunge’s (1984) study of academic libraries appears to confirm this. When the librarian was busy and not able to offer direct help, but simply made suggestions or directed a user, the highest reported success rate was 38%. For some libraries this dropped as low as 22%. Conversely, if the librarian was not busy and was able to assist in the search, the success rate rose as high as 75–80%. These results are even more startling when comparing professionals with ‘paraprofessionals’ (staff without a formal or postgraduate library qualification). It was found that user views of success lost 53 points when directions came from a paraprofessional, compared with a 10-point loss when from professionals (Murfin & Bunge, 1984, pp. 178–180).

Whether a library staff member accompanies the user is dependent on a number of issues. These include the size of the collection, the number of staff available, the number of users waiting, and the staff member’s confidence (even if misplaced) in the user’s finding capabilities.

There are benefits in taking the user to the shelves — this helps ensure that the user is in the right section, and allows for a discrete check that there are relevant items on the shelves, so the user can be left to look through them:

When this didn’t reveal much . . . of relevance she suggested we go and have a look at the shelves. She led me to a section and helped me search the shelves (unfortunately we didn’t find anything). (Response 218)

However, in larger and busy libraries the physical act of taking someone to the shelves can be difficult if the desk is then left unattended, which creates a new issue for users approaching an unoccupied desk. This creates a genuine dilemma for staff, who cannot be in two places at once. The Durrance study found that less than one user in five would return to a staff member when they had to wait for them to return (1989, pp. 34–35). In the current study several respondents commented unfavourably on unattended desks, particularly in this case:

I returned to the desk. As it was unoccupied, I left the library. (Response 12)

Murfin and Bunge found that directing users in larger libraries was less successful, and speculated this could be because of the increased complexity of

the library environment (1984, p. 180). It is possible to mitigate these issues to some extent — staff can call for back-up assistance before leaving the desk, or use notices that make it clear the desk is only temporarily unattended. RUSA Guideline 1.7.5 (RUSA, 2004) also advocates checking back at the desk regularly to see if users are waiting.

When accompanying the user is simply not possible, clear signs should be posted throughout the library, and staff need to provide clear verbal directions. There is also a need to encourage the user to return for more help if necessary. A 'pointer' who provides some user education in the process is not necessarily performing badly:

She referred me to the area of the library where I could find information on earthquakes and followed this up by coming to see me. (Response 24)

Without directions the user may be left floundering:

She did suggest I try the children's library or reference but gave no indication of where in the building these services were. (Response 243)

## **Unmonitored referrals**

Where the resources of a particular library or part of a library have been exhausted, RUSA Guideline 4.8 (RUSA, 2004) recognises the need to refer users to more appropriate resources. An unmonitored referral occurs when staff send users elsewhere in the library (or to an external organisation) without checking that appropriate resources are available (Dewdney & Ross, 1994, p. 227):

'Oh well you could look over there (pointing to shelves) under this number' (writing the call number 531.34 down on a piece of paper). These shelves later proved to be the Reference Section, and there were no titles close to the call number she gave me. (Response 255)

If users don't point out such errors, staff remain in happy ignorance and may continue with similar practices indefinitely.

During this study students also reported an unhealthy reliance on handing over pieces of paper with handwritten numbers. This is routine in many libraries, and often goes hand in hand with an assumption that a user will know what the numbers mean, and how to find the item on the shelves:

The Librarian made an 'unmonitored referral' with the two call number ranges provided (944.04 and 947), which were incorrect. (Response 207)

The user can feel let down when sent on a 'wild goose chase'. In the following description, the user had sufficient understanding to make a thorough check through the resources. Not all users would have the skills to do this, and the result was still unsuccessful:

She did not explain what was on the piece of paper or how it would help me. . . . I then walked downstairs and looked for the Dewey decimal classification number she had written. The number was not for a particular item, but for all the books [on this topic]. Thankfully, there were only about 30. I looked through the indices of each and found there was nothing mentioning an answer to my real question . . . (Response 266)

Dewdney and Ross conclude: 'The poor referral may get rid of the problem for the librarian, but it doesn't make the problem disappear for the user. The effective referral helps both' (1994, p. 229).



## Range of resources

At times there also appeared to be something of a fixation on the library catalogue. Ross and Nilsen describe staff routinely converting 'information' requests into a request for a book, when there may be other more appropriate resources available (2000, p. 151). Where the user was not able to see the screen, it is not always clear whether staff used the computer for alternatives such as databases and the Internet. However, there were cases in this study where there was clearly no attempt to look beyond the obvious:

When we had difficulty finding appropriate information, she did not seem very interested in looking further. . . . I asked her if there was anywhere else she could suggest to find the information, she shrugged her shoulders. She suggested I could contact them(?), which I took to mean the people involved with producing the journal. She said that I would have to pay money to get information. She then suggested I go back to the desk I began my enquiry at to see if they could help more. I said that this is where they said I could find the information, and she rolled her eyes! The librarian did not offer further help. (Response 241)

Placing too much reliance on the library catalogue can lead to the user only being offered resources held within the loan collection. Depending on the topic, it may be more effective to look through more reference materials or general books, or to search within CD-Roms, online databases and the Internet:

While the Internet may have been the best source of information for this type of enquiry, the librarian did not suggest any other source. She could have suggested taking a look at the health periodicals, for example. I was left to prompt her for directions to the non fiction area to look for resources on [the general topic area]. There were many, some referring to my subject. (Response 135)

Although not always offered when it would have been helpful, the Internet seems well accepted overall as a possible source of information. This is a promising development compared with an earlier *Library Visit* study (1998–2000), where it was felt that the full potential of the Internet as a useful source had not yet been realised. In that study the Internet was often treated as if it was a separate institution from the library (Ross & Nilsen, 2000, pp. 152–153). This did occur occasionally in this study:

Even though she asked if I had access to the internet she didn't mention that I could pay and use the library's internet terminals, therefore getting information immediately. (Response 222)

However, in the majority of cases where the Internet was suggested as a resource (although often a secondary resource when first options failed), the user was generally invited to make use of the Internet in the library.

When the librarian considered a range of resources, the results could be very good:

We set off in search of three items. The first was not at all useful; the second was ideal. I was instructed to 'sit there' at the large desk we had approached, and the Librarian set off to track down the third item. She returned with three children's books, one very old, but two of which were again ideal. (Response 249)

As students selected their own topics for this exercise, it is not always clear whether useful resources could actually be located in the library, but in the opinion of some of those involved, alternatives were not always examined or suggested:

I was told that that library had a copy of one of the books (there are about 59 in the series) and that was it. No offer to look on the internet or to see if the National Library had any. (Response 225)

In the example below, three books were identified, but two were unavailable and none were held in that library. The only alternative suggestion was a referral to a non-existent number in the reference section. However, the user's independent research revealed a wealth of useful information:

After the encounter, I had a quick look at the encyclopaedias held in the Reference section, which revealed a number of entries on [the topic] that would have satisfied my enquiry. The entries in World Book 2003 were particularly informative, complete with a diagram on the working of [the specific topic]. The library catalogue 'Superindex', which searches a number of databases, revealed three magazine articles on [the topic] from New Electronics magazine. The library catalogue link to Encyclopædia Britannica Online revealed several excellent references on [the topic] and also links to various websites. (Response 255)

One valuable resource that is often neglected is the wisdom and experience of colleagues. RUSA Guideline 5.4 (RUSA, 2004) suggests that library staff should consult with other librarians or experts when additional subject expertise would be helpful:

She did ask for help from her colleague who was more experienced and had a better idea of the libraries [*sic*] stock and helped find some material to answer the query. (Response 9)

The librarian seemed to be really knowledgeable but not afraid to ask someone else when necessary and she knew who to ask for help. . . . After a few attempts . . . we were not having much success so she phoned the librarian who . . . had taken us for the database tutorial and asked him about my query. (Response 258)

It is not easy for an outsider to understand the interpersonal dynamics of the reference desk, and it may be that the user is talking to the most experienced staff member. However, there did seem to be examples where workmates were not used as a resource even when they were available:

The librarian did not attempt to ask a colleague (there was another colleague on another computer terminal for most of the interview) . . . (Response 207)

## Concluding the encounter

At the end of an encounter, it is appropriate to check that all questions have been satisfactorily answered. This review encourages a user to think about missing elements, or to bring up new questions. This aspect is often neglected when time is short. However, it can encourage a disappointed user to indicate gaps or misunderstandings to increase the number of successful encounters:

The librarian did ask if there was anything else I required at which stage I thought of finding something to write your own wedding vows. (Response 8)

## Follow-up and encouragement to return

The RUSA guidelines are clear that the responsibilities of library staff extend beyond pointing users to possible resources. Guideline 5.1 (RUSA, 2004) indicates the importance of follow-up, in which the library staff member confirms with the user that their question has been completely answered. Follow-up questions can take place at different stages of the encounter. If the user has been left to examine likely resources, it may be necessary to approach them again to ask whether they have found what was needed. A less direct approach is to finish with a statement that encourages a user to return for more help if necessary, so that the follow-up decision is left to the user.

Durrance says follow-up questions can fix problems such as miscommunication, misunderstanding and faulty assumptions (1995, p. 254). For her, the follow-up question can be as simple as: 'Is everything OK?' Requesting this feedback can save an encounter when staff may not even be aware that it is failing. Gers and Seward reported that where the librarian asked: 'Does this answer your question?', users reported a correct answer 76% of the time. Where no such question was asked, users obtained a correct answer just 52% of the time (1985, p. 34).

There is a wide variation in the use of follow-up questions — Gers and Seward found these were reported in only 12% of encounters. In the first *Library Visit* study follow-up questioning is not always clear — a clear question was asked in 36.4% of encounters — but the researchers reported this was unlikely for another 23.4% (Dewdney & Ross, 1994, p. 228). It is also not possible to obtain a clear figure for this New Zealand study. However, a number of students did comment on this element within an encounter — or its noticeable absence.

The need for follow-up is clear when it is understood that some users may not understand that they are able to return to staff, and simply give up if they strike a problem. Massey-Burzio's focus group study found that academic library users (both faculty and students) felt they should know how to use the library, and were reluctant to ask questions. There was even a feeling that library staff may reprimand them if they admitted they did not know how to use a library resource (1998, p. 210). This perception can be easily removed if explicit permission is given to come back for more help if necessary.

A common approach in New Zealand libraries is for a verbal encouragement to come back for more help to be given at the stage where the user is left looking through resources:

When the staff member handed me the paper with the numbers on it she said: 'Come back if you don't find what you want'. This made me feel comfortable about approaching her again if I needed to. (Response 224)

The librarian can also approach the user at a later stage to check on their progress:

Approximately ten minutes later, I was sitting reading one of the books when she came up to me and asked 'How [is] it going, are you finding the sort of thing you wanted? We do have other material for example the Internet or periodicals if you're interested'. (Response 203)

While the latter approach relies more on serendipity to successfully relocate the user, the informal approach can still work well. The user is made to feel that their question is important and that they have not been forgotten:

Although he did not specifically invite me to ask for more help if necessary, he came back and checked several times to see if I was alright and needed any more help. (Response 229)

'Drip-feeding' of information is often used to avoid overloading the user with too much information. The staff member makes a preliminary range of suggestions, later recommending other resources if the first suggestions don't provide an answer:

I was left alone for approximately ten minutes, then the librarian returned to check on my progress. At this time she introduced the idea of the Internet and other sources. . . . She made a decision concerning the type of material to show me first; other types such as the Internet were only mentioned after I had spent some time browsing the shelves. (Response 203)

This approach is dependent on the user knowing that they can return to the same librarian if they do not find the information that they need — again emphasising the importance of a follow-up statement. When there is no such encouragement, some users reported reluctance to return:

Librarians A and B directed me to the relevant shelves without accompanying me. . . . [but] I did not find anything particularly relevant. . . . This could easily have been avoided if the librarians had invited me to return if I needed more help. I would not have felt comfortable returning unless invited to do so. (Response 17)

## User reactions

Even in the worst encounters, library staff usually did something right.

However, there was almost a sense of betrayal when an encounter started well (for example, with a friendly greeting) but things then deteriorated:

. . . but when my enquiry started to get a little hard she became less friendly. The eye contact started to drift as she battled with the computer . . . (Response 236)

However, the librarian's tone of voice, unhurried at the start of the reference question, changed to a brisk or impatient tone as the reference interview progressed. . . . It made me feel that I had to end the interview before I had what I wanted. . . . The librarian did not listen, continually provided incorrect search results, the reference interview results were incorrect and made no attempt to follow up at the end and after the reference interview. (Response 207)

Successful encounters impressed students very much, and are likely to be a valuable behavioural model for them in future:

I would definitely go back to that particular library and also use the Reference Librarian again. She was very approachable and helpful, and has attained godly status in my opinion. (Response 45)

Even negative encounters were a valuable learning experience for students, as their shock at some of the poor behaviours they observed also gave a lesson on how *not* to proceed. It is hoped that these reports of library encounters will provide timely reminders of the user experience for others involved in reference interactions.

As reported in the numerical results, some users were quite forgiving of one or two poor aspects of an encounter that ultimately proved satisfactory:

After a poor start the interview improved and I felt that we developed some rapport and empathy. The librarian achieved this by talking to me in a calm manner, giving me her full attention, concentrating hard on what I was saying and seeming to be genuinely interested in my question. (Response 218)

In the New Zealand study 17.2 % of students felt the encounter was unsuccessful, but did consider giving the staff member a second chance. Durrance reported that users found it hardest to accept uninterested staff, or to forgive behaviour that made them feel uncomfortable. They were more likely to return to a staff member who had tried hard, even if they failed to find the right answer (1989, p. 35).

It's clear from this analysis that reference encounters are very complex interactions, and that we can hear only one side of these stories. Very few encounters were doomed from the outset, and depending on the tactics employed, there were many possible outcomes. Things could deteriorate after a promising start, but encounters could be saved by the timely intervention of library staff (or sometimes the user).



## Conclusions

Results from this study match earlier findings from overseas — unfortunately without the improvements noted in some of the more recent studies, such as Ross and Nilsen's *Has the Internet Changed Anything in Reference? The Library Visit Study, Phase 2* (2000).

There is clearly room for improvement in the reference interactions taking place in many New Zealand libraries. It is hoped that details from this study will assist library managers in developing training programmes so that staff fully understand the dynamics of reference encounters, and know how to apply helpful behaviours.

Unobtrusive testing has largely 'gone off the boil' as an issue in recent years, for a number of reasons. This may be partly because there appear to be no clear solutions to the problems — study after study demonstrated similar findings. For some, this issue has become as tired as a broken record. There has been a noticeable change in focus within many libraries, perhaps because of the consistently poor results from unobtrusive tests. There is a growing tendency to avoid providing direct research assistance, and an increasingly common expectation that users will manage their own research independently. This shift may be primarily for financial reasons — where staff numbers have declined or have not kept pace with user numbers. However, the shift also reflects international trends and represents an intentional philosophical change within many libraries — a change of emphasis to user instruction.

This change has not always been acknowledged within the reference policies of New Zealand libraries, and can result in uncertainty for both staff and users, who are unsure of the services that should be provided. This lack of clarity means that a variety of reference practices are evident within New Zealand libraries — and the study makes it clear that some are more successful than others.

The move away from direct research assistance is a departure from more traditional definitions of reference service, which emphasised the involvement of library staff in the research process until an answer had been obtained. While there is nothing wrong with assisting a user to take on more of the responsibility for finding the correct answer, this practice requires that library staff take on more of an instructional role. Fundamentally, the practice requires that library staff routinely confirm that users are sufficiently well informed about library resources to be able to identify and make effective use of the most appropriate resources in their search for an answer.

Without this check, unsupported users may fail to find the information they need, although the answer may indeed exist. Users who fail to find their own answer may also feel distinctly discouraged from approaching library staff for more assistance — both to meet their immediate needs, and also for any future requirements. Is this practice sowing the seeds for an unstoppable decline in library services? That may be an overly dramatic scenario, but it has more than a hint of a future reality.

It is clear from this study that the practice of shifting responsibility to the user is taking place in New Zealand, and that this is not always well supported. The premise appears to be that users know more about their research needs, and they should therefore have more control of the search. This is a worthwhile aim, but if unobtrusive studies have shown that library staff, with their greater knowledge of the library's resources, struggle to find an answer, is there any value in an assumption that the user can do a better job without any assistance?

It cannot be denied that it *is* an inadequate response for library staff to play no part in the process of searching for an answer, beyond directing a user to the library catalogue or the Internet, unless there has been an attempt to determine the user's degree of confidence in using library resources. This abdication of responsibility is one likely explanation for some of the poor results revealed by this study, and the practice is unlikely to increase user perceptions of the value of libraries in future.

The success of a reference encounter is not necessarily the result of either the behaviour or the communication skills of library staff — encounters contain too many variables to easily determine the reasons behind success. It is also evident from some of the comments in this study that a strongly motivated and capable library user can overcome the inadequacies of many encounters, in spite of limited assistance from library staff.

Nevertheless, there appear to be a number of library staff behaviours that can be seen to have helped many encounters, as reported by those most directly involved — the person in need of information. An understanding of effective behaviours may be the key to improving reference success in New Zealand libraries.

The library world has shown considerable interest in the concept of information literacy, particularly in school and academic libraries, and the concept is present, albeit with a lower emphasis, within some public libraries. The principles of information literacy (regardless of the specific standard) provide an excellent framework for user independence, but require time and library staff input into training library users in these skills. This study shows too many

occasions when libraries are not consistently offering instructional guidance to their users. Too often there is an assumption that users are already familiar with library resources. This study provides evidence of those assumptions, and raises a challenge to all library staff to give users the assistance they need to develop or enhance their own research skills.

Clearly, it is also the responsibility of library educators to ensure that library studies students are aware of the importance of confirming the true information need in all reference transactions, and understand how vital it is that library users have the necessary skills to locate information independently.

However, educators are not the only group with this responsibility — employers have an equally important role. Library employers need to ensure that all staff (including those without library qualifications) are fully aware of the reference practices and policies followed within their libraries. It is equally important that staff maintain their understanding of the skills required for an effective reference encounter, and recognise the need for regular training to emphasise and refresh those skills.

Recent developments for professional registration within LIANZA reflect an acknowledgement of the importance of maintaining currency in all aspects of professional library work. However, as reference work is frequently undertaken by library staff at all levels, skills in the reference transaction become necessary for all employees, not just those employed in professional library positions.

Ironically, at the same time as there is a movement towards the professional registration of librarians, there has also been a noticeable tendency to de-skill many front-desk positions within New Zealand libraries. While a comprehensive in-house training programme will assist in ensuring that staff are aware of library resources and understand the necessary processes to establish exactly what each user wants, it is not clear that this is currently available in all libraries around New Zealand.

In some cases library staff appear to have been left to offer reference assistance without an effective introduction to reference practices. Where staff are unsure of the extent of the service that should be offered, some favour a minimalist approach, and in some libraries even library management have a similar expectation. Many libraries operate under significant staffing constraints, and it is not always possible to offer an extensive reference service at all times. However, there are a number of strategies that can improve the outcomes for users, some as simple as designing user guides for frequently used resources such as the library catalogue or for Internet research. Other strategies require a longer-term plan, and form the basis of the recommendations arising from this study.

## Recommendations

The research results indicate that the library community in New Zealand could benefit from more consistency. The experiences described by students are sufficiently disturbing to merit changes to provide much needed clarity, for both library staff and users.

This can be provided by a clear endorsement of recognised quality standards for reference service. At present reference service guidelines have not been formally recognised or endorsed by LIANZA. Formal endorsement and promotion of appropriate guidelines could significantly improve standards for reference service. The behavioural guidelines developed by RUSA (2004) provide an excellent structure for best practice in reference encounters (covering face-to-face, telephone and electronic encounters). These are already used informally as an aid to training within some New Zealand libraries. However, use of the guidelines is patchy, and they are not always well recognised.

It is therefore recommended that LIANZA officially endorse the RUSA guidelines, and promote them widely as a valuable tool for quality reference services. The guidelines can function as a self-regulating tool for library staff active in the field of reference, allowing them to regularly evaluate their own practices and behaviour. The guidelines also act as an effective teaching tool within library education, and as a valuable tool for training new staff.

There is no question that an endorsement by LIANZA could act as a springboard to encourage the development of New Zealand-based guidelines. While the guidelines seem very applicable to New Zealand, local guidelines would not only highlight the issue for all libraries, but also enable areas of difference between New Zealand and American libraries to be acknowledged, and adjustments made. The RUSA guidelines would perform well until a local alternative is produced.

Allied to this, staff working in reference work would benefit from more specialised reference collaboration and support. It is recommended that key reference players, particularly in the more major reference libraries, actively pursue the formation of a reference special interest group through LIANZA. A number of special interest groups exist within this organisation, but there is no New Zealand equivalent to RUSA. Establishing a support network of this kind could assist in collaborative training opportunities, and encourage a team approach for developing New Zealand-based reference guidelines.

It is also recommended that a more informal support network for reference staff be established through the creation of a New Zealand-based electronic discussion forum or web log that focuses on reference issues. This forum could encourage the development of a special interest group, while also providing a forum for sharing knowledge and stimulating discussion on current reference issues.

The role played by employers in improving reference service within their libraries cannot be forgotten. It is recommended that employers actively encourage staff to obtain library-specific qualifications. The need for reference skills for all front desk staff needs to be emphasised at the time of recruitment. There should be a clear expectation that new employees should have good reference skills, or demonstrate their willingness to develop these.

This research demonstrates that users do not always understand what library staff can do for them, and at times library staff themselves also seemed unsure about the level of service that they should be providing. Individual libraries can endorse the RUSA guidelines, but library management can also enhance the consistency of services. Reference policies need to include a library's minimum standards for reference services, and their implementation.

According to RUSA guidelines, a *reference encounter* should ideally combine an interview between the user and the staff member with user education that will benefit users in their future use of the library. One of the purposes of this research was to establish whether these elements were present in New Zealand reference encounters. While some students may not have mentioned any user education that did occur within their encounter (the assignment did not explicitly request this information), it is clear that at times this was not offered when it could have been useful. Emphasising user education within all encounters could be an easy method of improving future outcomes, and it is recommended that skills in effective instruction be included within reference training initiatives.

There is also considerable value in correctly applying the principles of information literacy within all library environments. Instructional programmes based on information literacy principles will mean that more of the general public will have this knowledge. Until that time, it is important for library staff to understand the necessity of continually checking that users feel comfortable and familiar with the resources they use, and to provide instruction where necessary.

It is also vital that employers implement and extend formal reference training initiatives to ensure that existing and new staff are aware of the most effective current practices, while reminding them of the value of tried and true service

methods. In-house training can be of great value, and although this is an expensive option for smaller libraries, it may be more achievable should the collaborative opportunities discussed above be implemented.

Employers have the ability to provide significant incentives for maintaining currency in library skills, with a variety of strategies being available to them. These include remuneration incentives, promotional opportunities, and simple discussion opportunities within regular performance reviews. These provide ongoing opportunities to correct poor practices and reward excellent performance, and it is recommended that these be used to their fullest extent.

Library staff also need to reflect on their current reference behaviours, and to operate under principles of continuous self-improvement. This begins with a recognition that problems exist within current reference practices, which is the essential first step towards change. Staff need to be willing to undertake training opportunities whenever these are available, and to proactively seek out, promote or initiate training opportunities.

There is a real need for back-room reference training to reinforce good practices, combined with practical exercises that prepare new staff for real-life issues. Although ultimately new staff must practice their reference skills on library users, back-room training means that staff will be well prepared *before* they begin direct interaction with users. Supervision during early encounters will also ensure that a quality service is maintained at all times. Training opportunities of this kind can also be usefully supplemented by the identification of key staff as reference 'exemplars' — librarians who consistently demonstrate positive behaviours with library users, who can be actively promoted as mentors during staff training.

It is clear that educators must ensure that their graduates have an excellent understanding of reference practices, including skills in the reference interview, and recognise the value of effective communication. Graduates must understand the value of using a wide range of resources, and be effective in instructing others in the use of these. They need a good understanding of the most effective strategies to consider when teaching both children and adults. Students also need to be aware that things can go wrong with reference encounters, and be fully informed of the findings of unobtrusive studies such as this current study.

There is the potential for these encounters to provide a deep 'learning moment', where students absorb and makes conscious modifications of their own behaviour in the longer term. Comments from some students suggest these experiences were indeed a valuable learning opportunity. A bad experience



at the reference desk can mean that students become aware of practices to avoid within their own working life. Equally, an excellent experience provides students with a model of effective practice:

I would definitely go back to that particular library and also use the Reference Librarian again. She was very approachable and helpful, and has attained godly status in my opinion. (Response 45)

It was noted that sometimes when the student experienced an 'average' encounter, the learning was not as profound. Such unexceptional encounters meant that some students simply described and analysed the event, and perhaps may not have realised that all encounters are not as effective.

As a result, these extremes of experience can be used to give students a more profound understanding of the impact of poor service on users. Using selected examples from this study can be an effective teaching tool to deeply embed notions of best practice in both academic and in-house teaching environments.

This is confirmed by other teachers:

It is felt valuable to encourage students to co-operate in a real exercise which allows them to participate in testing, gives them experience of being the user of a reference service and enables them to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular method of testing. (Head, Marcella, & Smith, 1995, p. 28)

Perhaps it is only by participating in exercises such as this that students are able fully to appreciate the enquirer's point of view. Within the curriculum, rather than purely concentrating on their assumption of the role of the librarian, it might be of more lasting value if students were to assume rather more frequently the role of the user. (Head & Marcella, 1993, p. 13)

Some encounters within this study provide sufficient detail to be used for effective learning using role-playing (see the four role-playing scenarios). This allows staff and students to work out their responses before encountering similar situations within a real setting.

In the light of these research results, it is hard to avoid a growing conviction that there is also a need for continuing education. There needs to be more recognition that some staff can become 'stale' and lose motivation. Burton (1990) calls continuing education 'mid-career education', and this is necessary throughout professional life. Such education can be partly informal — for example, through keeping abreast of published library literature. There is considerable value in the existing electronic forums such as nz-libs, lib-FL and others (both locally and internationally) in keeping library staff abreast of current issues facing the profession. However, recent moves within the library profession towards a certification system are also very positive, reflecting the

recognition of the value of more formal education as part of the process of maintaining currency. For that reason, an additional recommendation arising from this study is that all library employers should endorse the LIANZA initiative.

There is great potential for follow-up research in several areas of New Zealand reference work. Replicating this research among our Pacific neighbours would be of considerable value, allowing for some very interesting comparisons. There is also good potential for related research following on, such as Radford's 1999 study in which library staff were interviewed on their perceptions of the success of an encounter, and their comments were then compared with users' perceptions. An examination could be carried out as to whether students' experiences as users had made them more empathetic when dealing with clients. This cannot be entirely confirmed by this current study, and would be an interesting area for future investigation.

All these options would be of considerable interest and significance in enhancing mutual understanding between librarians and library users.

Finally, it is recommended that libraries and their staff develop a checklist of different stages within an encounter, to highlight missed elements. Any routine should include the following steps:

✓ ***Essential reference steps***

- Clear invitation that encourages users to seek assistance.
- Needs clearly established through questioning about the topic.
- Suitable resources identified and located.
- Confirm user familiarity with resources or provide instruction.
- Explicit encouragement to return for more assistance.
- Clear check that the information need is satisfied.



## Summary of recommendations

- LIANZA to endorse RUSA guidelines (2004) as the first stage in the development of local guidelines.
- Major reference libraries to actively encourage collaboration and information sharing among all staff involved in reference work.
- Formation of a reference special interest group through LIANZA.
- New Zealand-based discussion forum or web log targeting reference staff.
- Reference policies to include minimum standards for reference services.
- User education emphasised within all reference encounters.
- Recognition of the value of information literacy programmes.
- Increasing staff awareness of potential problems with current reference practices, encouraging self-regulation of behaviour.
- Employers actively encourage staff to obtain library specific qualifications.
- In-house, back-room training to maintain effective practices, using examples and role-playing scenarios to deeply embed best practices.
- The active promotion of reference exemplars.
- Checklist of essential elements for all reference encounters.
- Explore New Zealand-based and international collaborative research opportunities.

Let us all strive for the 'godly status' of reference exemplars.

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# Appendix 1: Reference Encounter Survey

## 72 271 User Education and Reference Skills Reference Encounter Survey

1. What specific kind of help did you want to get in response to your question?  
(That is, what did you want to know or find out?)
2. What answer did you get to your reference question.
3. To what extent would you say the librarian was friendly or pleasant?  
Not at all friendly Very friendly  
1            2            3            4            5            6            7
4. How helpful was the answer given, in terms of your own needs?  
Not at all helpful Very helpful  
1            2            3            4            5            6            7
5. By the end of your conversation, how well did the librarian seem to understand what you really wanted?  
Did not understand at all Understood completely  
1            2            3            4            5            6            7
6. How satisfactory was your experience as a whole?  
Not at all satisfactory Very satisfactory  
1            2            3            4            5            6            7
7. Given the nature of this interaction, if you had the option, would you return to this staff member with another question?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_            No \_\_\_\_\_            Not sure \_\_\_\_\_
8. What kind of library did you visit? (check one)  
Academic (large/general/main) \_\_\_\_\_ Academic (departmental or subject) \_\_\_\_\_  
Public library (large/central) \_\_\_\_\_ Public library (small or branch) \_\_\_\_\_  
Other (please specify what kind) \_\_\_\_\_

**DO NOT IDENTIFY THE LIBRARY BY NAME OR LOCATION**

## Appendix 2: Letter inviting survey participation

-- CONFIDENTIAL --

Dear User Education student,

Recently we obtained funding for a research project using students in the course 72 271 User Education and Reference Skills, based around work you recently completed for the second assessment. We would now like to begin the project, and hope you will be interested in working with us. Pam Bidwell and Rebecca Young, both from the Information and Library Studies section, will be working on this project, and we also have a research assistant: Keira McCullough.

Our project is based around research undertaken by Patricia Dewdney and Catherine Sheldrick Ross, written up in Reading 2.12: 'Flying a Light Aircraft' (Dewdney & Ross, 1994, pp. 217–30), and also in a more recent article: 'Has the Internet Changed Anything in Reference?' (Ross & Nilsen, 2000, pp. 147–55).

Last year Pam Bidwell made contact with the original authors, who gave permission for this research to be replicated here in New Zealand. This research has received formal approval from the Ethics Committee of The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand.

This is what Catherine Sheldrick Ross and her new research partner Kirsti Nilsen wrote about their study:

“. . . to describe, from a library user's point of view, the experience of asking a reference question

... to identify aspects of library reference service that are particularly helpful to a library user who requires staff assistance in finding an answer to his/her question.

As a prospective librarian, you will benefit from this study by becoming more aware of the reference process from the user's perspective."

This research relates to the reference encounter you described in Task 2 of your assessment. We are particularly interested in the impact of electronic resources, including the Internet. To participate, we ask you to answer a short electronic survey. This is accessible when you sign onto the Online Campus, and allows you to "cut and paste" relevant material from the assessment. To access the Online Campus go to:

<https://www.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/online/index.cfm>

Sign in, using your student ID. The default password is your full date of birth (including century) — for example, someone born on January 1st, 1960, will have this 8-digit password: 01011960.

If you can't recall your password you can email [helpdesk@openpolytechnic.ac.nz](mailto:helpdesk@openpolytechnic.ac.nz) to request a reminder.

There is a direct link to the survey from the Support pages for your course — click the link called: **72271 online survey**. You can also access it directly through this URL:

<https://www.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/online/secure.cfm/support/72271/Questionnaire.html>

This survey is completely voluntary and quite separate from your course activities. Whether or not you choose to participate in the study does not affect evaluation of your performance in this course in *any* way.

For research purposes it is important that only one response is received from each student, and to avoid duplicate responses we do ask for your student number. However, this information will only be seen by our research assistant — the number is stripped from the final results.

We expect to publish some preliminary results in October, with articles and conference presentations likely both in New Zealand and internationally.

To make sure the research is undertaken in ideal conditions **confidentiality** is very important. To help us with this, please do not discuss this research until the end of October.

All your contributions will bring considerable value to the project, regardless of the quality of your reference encounter. We hope you are all interested in being involved.

Pam Bidwell  
Senior Lecturer, Information and Library Studies

## Appendix 3: Follow-up letter inviting survey participation

Dear 72271 students,

Recently you should have received a letter from us about the reference research we're undertaking, based around the second assessment for the User Education course. Thanks to those of you who have already completed the survey — although that's only a small number so far.

Please don't delay if you want to be involved in our research — access to the Online Campus will disappear for semester one students on July 14th. I'm hopeful this message will encourage more of you, and this link takes you directly to the survey:

<https://www.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/online/secure.cfm/support/72271/questionnaire.html>

The survey has only eight questions, with just 2 asking for a text based response — the easiest option is to simply cut and paste relevant sections from your second assessment.

A query has been raised about what was meant by the second question: What answer did you get to your reference question? Essentially we are interested in what happened after you asked your question — include information such as questions asked (you can include the dialogue), successful and unsuccessful strategies, and also the result of the encounter. Your responses can be very detailed — the boxes accept anything from one word to two thousand words (there's actually no limit!). We have software to analyse text responses, and I'm hopeful there will be some good material for a LIANZA conference presentation scheduled later in the year.

If you've already submitted a form and would like to add more, we can merge your responses — just visit the site again and include your student ID.

I need to state very firmly that neither myself nor Rebecca Young will see any responses until after identifying information has been stripped away, which is why this reminder has been sent to all students, including those who have already completed the survey. If you have any technical problems with the survey please contact our helpdesk:

[helpdesk@openpolytechnic.ac.nz](mailto:helpdesk@openpolytechnic.ac.nz).

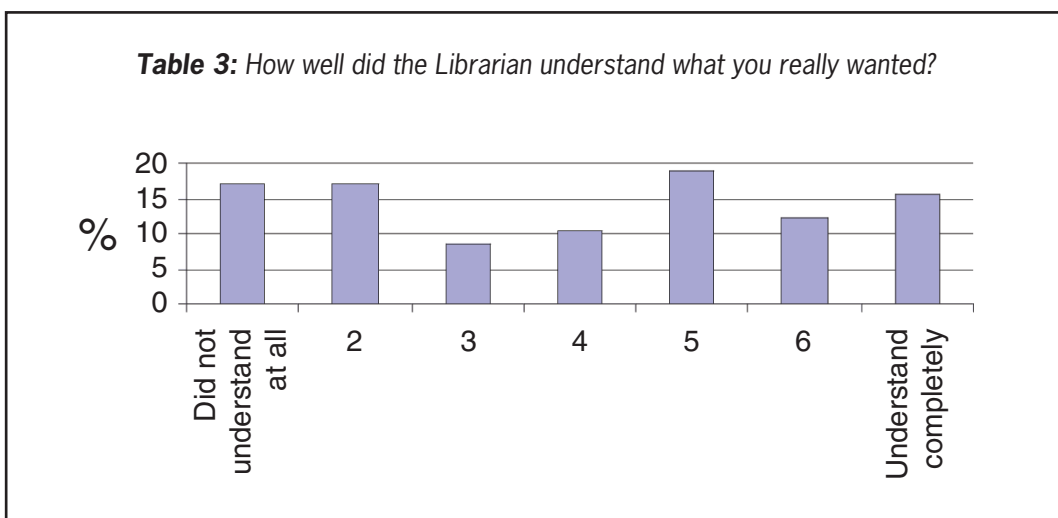
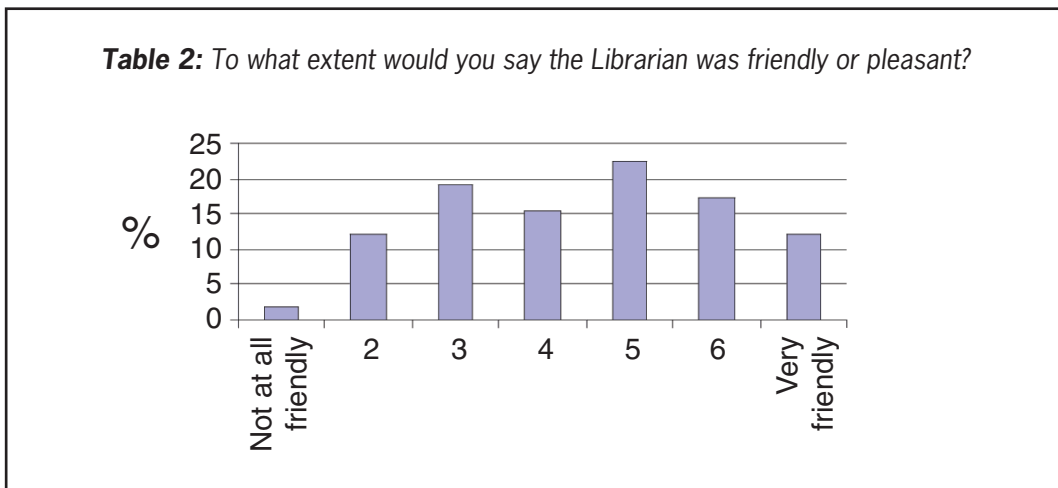
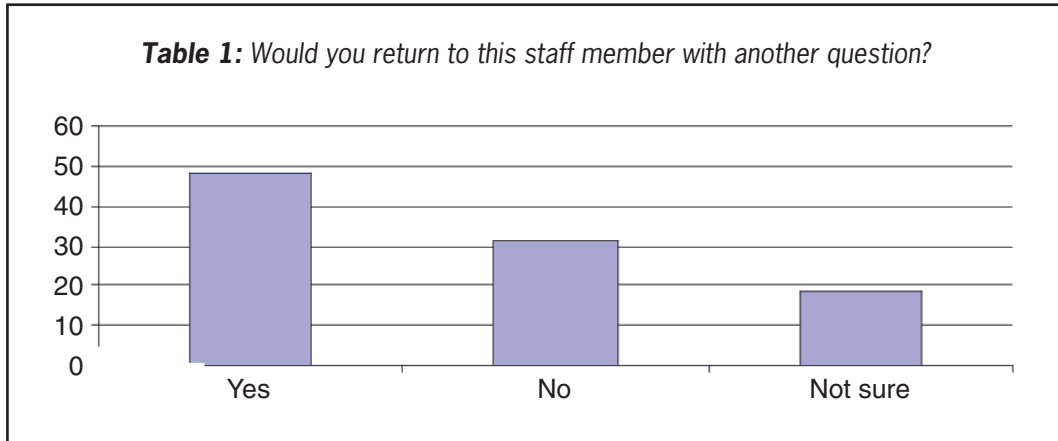
Later in the week our research assistant Keira McCullough will be contacting students who have not yet completed the form to see if you have had any problems. Her email address is: keira.mccullough@openpolytechnic.ac.nz.

Regards

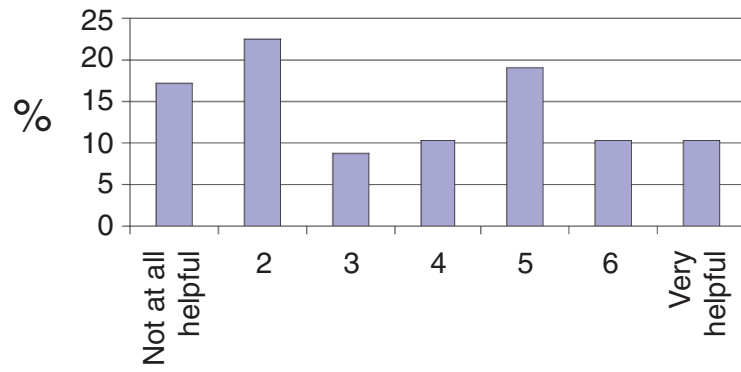
Pam Bidwell  
Senior Lecturer, Information and Library Studies  
The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand  
+ 64 4 913 5773



# Tables



**Table 4:** How helpful was the answer given, in terms of your own needs?



**Table 5:** How satisfactory was your experience as a whole?

