


Circulation Regulations and Their Effect on User Return of Books: The Case of University of Zambia Library

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ABSTRACT

The problem of delays in returning library books is common to all categories of library users at the University of Zambia. However, little is known about what causes the delay in returning the borrowed books. To address this gap, the authors investigated circulation policies at Zambia's leading academic library. The objective was to establish the effect of library regulations on the return of library books. Using a survey method, the study targeted 90 full-time students who were randomly selected. Quantitative data were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences while qualitative data were coded and analyzed thematically. The results revealed that circulation policies have an effect on returning the borrowed books by users. These findings provide a useful contribution to the dearth of literature on this subject and offer valuable information to inform future planning.

KEYWORDS

Academic Libraries, Billing, Borrowing Periods, Information Resources, Library Circulation, Library Policies, Loan Periods, Overdue Fines

INTRODUCTION

The library is the life blood of academic life in any university. According to Melgosa (2005), the biological heart continuously sends life-giving blood to all parts of the body. In the same way, the library actively revitalizes the university's learning processes by providing appropriate and timely resources. It continually renews its information sources, provides regular, extended access to a variety of resources, and actively seeks to reach everyone within the organization. The library has an even more vital relationship to the academic community than before because books and other resources do not merely accompany academic activities, but are the fabric of those activities. The University library is an integral part of a university, which exists to meet the information needs of students, staff, researchers, and other users in the community.

BACKGROUND

The University of Zambia Library like other libraries formulates library circulation regulations/policies to ensure that library resources are used effectively. For consistency of service, high productivity, and

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efficiency, organizations provide guidelines to be followed by those involved in the service delivery or production process. According to Kang, Wang & Wang (2019), library circulation is the function of lending library materials to the users of the library. They further assert that the circulation service is an important, traditional library service. Circulation policies are the rules that govern borrowing and renewing materials and the penalties for overdue, lost, or damaged items.

Borrowing services are the most popular library service, and they are typically listed as the first service type on library websites. Correspondingly, circulation policies are necessary, including rules for the length of checkout, loan quotas, overdue fines, renewals, recalls, and loss or damage of library materials, based on user group and material type. Many articles have been written about academic library fines and circulation policies over the past few decades (Reed et al., 2014; Sung & Tolppanen, 2013; Wilson et al., 2015). However, there has been little research on such policies at the University of Zambia Library. This study aims to investigate and explore the status, features, and patterns of circulation policies employed in the University of Zambia Library.

Statement of the Problem

Circulation of information resources is one of the most important library services that the university library provides. Circulation rules stipulate who is eligible to borrow books and how many books may be borrowed at a time and for what duration. Academic libraries such as UNZA library usually increase the number of library books a user is permitted to borrow based on the category of user and their borrowing privileges. Undergraduates may be allowed to borrow up to four books for two weeks, while graduate students and members of the academic staff are usually allowed to borrow eight books for three months. The problem of delays in returning library books is common to all categories of library users at UNZA. Available circulation records in the university library under study reveal the incidence of delayed returning of information resources. However, little is known about why there is this tendency among students and what causes the delay or failure to return library books. Seeking to address this gap, the authors pursued a study of circulation policies at Zambia's leading academic library to establish whether the circulation regulations set out by the library cause the delay or failure to return library books on time.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to investigate circulation regulations and their effect on user return of books. Specific objectives were to:

1. Establish reasons why students return books late to the library.
2. Determine the effect that circulation regulations might have on returning of library books.

RELATED LITERATURE

There have been numerous articles discussing and evaluating the policies for loan periods, renewals, fines, and recalls. Of these articles, many are informative case studies. For example, Kang, Wang & Wang (2019) investigated and explored the status, features, and patterns of circulation policies employed in the top 46 Chinese university libraries. The results indicated that circulation practices vary among libraries but common trends exist, including lengthened checkout and renewal period or unlimited borrowing length, increased number of items, and no overdue fines or blocks on accounts until items are returned, or volunteer service, or online examination of library rules and regulation, or establishment of amnesty days regarding overdue procedures.

Similarly, changes in loan periods and fines, implemented at New York University's Bobst Library, were evaluated and reported in an article by Rupp et al. (2010). Zweibel & Lane (2012) probed the effects of policy changes by evaluating circulation activity data recorded by Columbia University

Libraries from Ex Libris transactions. A longitudinal study assessing and exploring the effect of policy changes at a small academic library reported by Reed et al. (2014), found that the removal of fines had no significant effect on borrower return rates and circulation numbers but did show an overall increase in satisfaction among users. Wilson (2014) used several methods to assess circulation policies, which indicated the need to increase undergraduate loan periods while simultaneously eliminating fines for regular overdue materials. Subsequently, Wilson et al. (2015) surveyed circulation policies at major academic libraries in the United States. The article called for a shift in policy toward less restrictive, more generous circulation, and low or no fines to meet current user needs. Carter (2016) surveyed circulation policy trends in 69 academic art libraries in the United States and Canada. He suggested assessment methods and areas of potential change for librarians considering reevaluation of their circulation policies.

Boyce (2014) evaluated circulation policies related to borrowing periods and billing. In an attempt to better align the policies across each unit, and to create a more consistent user experience. These changes were found to dramatically decrease staff time necessary for billing while improving user satisfaction with the borrowing policies. Significantly fewer books went into billing, suggesting no adverse effects on collection maintenance.

The literature consists primarily of reports on localized studies of policies focused on the academic libraries of the developed world, though the various articles are helpful. Little research has been done concerning the development of circulation policies and providing enlightening information about circulation policies at UNZA. Seeking to address this gap, the authors investigated circulation regulations and their effect on user return of books at UNZA Library.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a survey method and the population comprised full-time University of Zambia students. A random sampling technique was used in which every student on full-time studies was given an equal opportunity of being selected as they entered the Library. A semi-structured questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from a sample of 90 respondents. Quantitative data collected was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) while the qualitative data were coded into themes and analyzed using Excel. Two weeks was set aside for data collection. Data was collected from 2nd November to 15th November 2020.

Presentation of Findings

The findings are presented according to three major themes, namely; demographics of respondents, reasons for returning borrowed materials late, and the effect of circulation regulations on returning borrowed library materials.

Demographics of Respondents

Out of a total of 90 respondents, 53% were female while 47% were male. This suggests that the majority of the respondents were female. In terms of age of respondents, 39 respondents were aged 20-25 years, 31 were aged 26-31 years, 20 were aged 32-37 years, and 8 were aged 38 and above. Two respondents did not indicate their ages. This finding seems to suggest that majority of the respondents were below thirty years of age (Tables 1-2).

Table 3 shows that the majority 53.3% of the respondents agreed that the regulation on opening time/hours of the library affects returning of books. The table also depicts that the majority 66.5% of the respondents agreed that library regulation to restrict access to some library collections affect the returning of such materials when they are borrowed. With regard to the penalty fine for defaulters, the table shows that 59.9% of the respondents agreed that this regulation contributes to the late returning of books.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by sex

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	42	47
Female	48	53
Total	90	100

Table 2. Age distribution of respondents

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage
20-25	35	38.8
26-31	28	31.1
32-37	18	20.0
38 and Above	7	7.7
No Response	2	2.2
Total	88	97.8
Total	90	100

Similarly, 72.2% of the respondents also agreed that the upward adjustment of library fees and penalty fine for defaulters after two years affect the returning of books. The table furthermore reveals that the majority (72.2%) of the respondents agreed that the regulation to return books before or on the due date influence library users to return books late, and 57.7% agreed that the regulation on a restricted number of books allowed to borrow affect the return of books.

Table 4 shows that (59.9%) of the respondents agreed that a short loan period leads to delays in returning of books borrowed. However, the table shows that the majority (72.1%) of the respondents disagreed that the library environment was conducive for reading. With regard to opening hours, the majority (67.7%) of the respondents agreed that the library should remain open on holidays while (56.5%) agreed that the extended opening hours should be sustained. The table also shows that the majority (59.9%) agreed that multiple copies of available books were available in the library, and

Table 3. Reasons for returning borrowed materials late

Circulations regulations	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. Library opening times affects overdues	10	11.1	38	42.2	20	22.2	22	24.4
2.Restrict access to some library collections	26	28.8	34	37.7	20	22.2	10	11.1
3. Penalty for defaulters should be very strict	23	25.5	31	34.4	27	30	9	10
4. Penalty should be revised every two years	27	30.0	38	42.2	17	18.8	8	8.8
5. Return books before or on due date	37	41.1	28	31.1	21	23.3	4	4.4
6. No. of books allowed on loan should be increased	31	34.4	21	23.3	26	28.8	12	13.3

Table 4. Circulation regulations and their effect on returning of library books

Effect of circulation regulations	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
1. Short loan period leads to delays in returning of books	33	36.6	21	23.3	18	20.0	18	20.0
2. Conducive library environment for reading	11	12.2	14	15.5	42	46.6	23	25.5
3. Opening of library on holidays	38	42.2	23	25.5	19	21.1	10	11.1
4. Extending library opening hours	25	27.7	26	28.8	16	17.7	23	25.5
5. Availability of multiple copies of books	13	14.4	41	45.5	26	28.8	10	11.1
6. Sufficient opening hours of the library during the week	37	41.1	22	24.4	11	12.2	20	22.2
7. Sufficient library opening hours on weekends	31	34.4	19	21.1	12	13.3	28	31.1

(65.5%) were of the view that the library opens sufficient hours during the week. Furthermore, the table shows that (55.5%) of the respondents agreed that the opening hours of the library were sufficient.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of findings was guided by the two specific objectives of the study, namely; to establish reasons why students return books late and to determine the effect that circulation rules and regulations might have on returning of borrowed materials.

Reasons Why Students Return Books Late

This study has revealed that students return library materials late because of the circulation regulations set out by the University Library such as library opening times to the public, perceived short loan periods, and a limited number of items that a person is allowed to borrow at a time, restricted access to certain library collections, and minimal penalty fees and failure by the library to strictly adhere to the regulations. For example, observations reveal that students without accommodation on campus are affected by distance to the library. As a consequence, they either find the service points closed when they come to return the books or may fail to return on time because of the distance to the library. Lecture time tables also conflict with library service point opening and closing times. This makes it difficult for some students to find time to return books before service points close because of having a series of lectures in a day.

Moreover, the existence of short loan periods in some sections, cause some students to fail to work within regulated time because they either have a lot to extract from the book or the copies are few to go round. As a result, such students have no option but to use the book until their assignment is done. Restricted access to certain library collections sometimes leads to undesirable tendencies by students to hide or hold on to certain relevant titles once an opportunity to access such areas arises. Other students also reach maximum renewals and hence opt to keep books for as long as they want because they will not be allowed to renew those books again.

Additionally, the unconducive library environment for reading compels some students to reluctantly come to the library only if they want to borrow and consequently return the library materials late because they are either accommodated off-campus or use friends to return books for them. Such students used, sometimes return material at their own time. In this study, 72.1% of the respondents disagreed that the university library's environment was conducive for reading. This comes in the light

of the library's poor ventilation, seasonal water leakages, poorly lighted, overcrowded reading spaces, and inappropriate reading tables. As a consequence, when the library environment is not conducive, students may be reluctant to go there to borrow or to return library materials on the stipulated due date. The library has three fundamental components that encompass all other activities: the great Bs, the Building, Books, and Brain. There should be adequate accommodation and space in the library for all anticipated activities. Indeed, library buildings and the environment must be conducive for learning. This supports the argument that library regulations have a bearing on returning library material after the due date as indicated by the majority of the respondents in this study.

Effect of Circulation Rules and Regulations on Returning of Borrowed Materials

Library regulations are one of the factors that may influence the late returning of library books. The effect of the circulation regulations set out by the library is that students may return the books late because the library service point opening and closing times might not be convenient to some students. A closer look at the itemized statements on regulations and defaulters shows that the respondents strongly agree that opening times of the library affect returning of books. 56.7% of respondents agree that extended library hours should be sustained. This finding supports Wilson et al. (2015) opinion that convenient opening times of the library are a crucial factor in making library users return books borrowed. This is with particular reference to opening hours during weekdays, on weekends, and holidays. It is therefore important that the opening and closing times of the library should be convenient for readers who either want to borrow or return borrowed materials. Indeed, coincidentally, the majority (65.5%) of the respondents agree that the library opening hours are sufficient enough during the week and the majority (55.5%) of the respondents also agree that the library hours are sufficient on weekends.

The length of time that libraries are open determines whether library materials may or may not be used, and thus indirectly determines the degree of physical accessibility to books. It, therefore, follows that a student may not return library materials on time because opening times and the period in which the student is expected to use the book may not be convenient or enough. The loan periods set out by the library can therefore have an effect on returning of materials borrowed because the period in which the student is expected to use the book may not be convenient or enough.

For example, in the Short Loan Collection section of the library, the length of time a student is expected to use the book is two and half hours within the library building. This period may not be enough for some students. The library in the study area operates from 08:30 hours to midnight on Monday to Friday, and from 08:30 hours to 22:00 hours on Saturdays, and from 09:00 hours to 22:00 hours on Sundays.

The library opens from 09:00 hours to 17:00 hours on holidays, but towards and during examinations time, because that time, the anticipated use is seen as great enough to justify it, the hours are extended to 22:00 hours. However, the lending/returning times of library materials are from 09:00 hours to 20:00 hours during the hours the library is open on working days. But, on Saturdays and holidays, the lending times are from 09:00 hours to 16:45 hours. On Sundays, there is no lending out except in the Short Loan collection section where the lending regulation is two and half hours. Although these typical library operational hours might be satisfactory and should be sustained because the library is heavily used in the evenings and weekends for study by students, the lending times and periods in which a borrower is expected to use the book may not be satisfactory. This result is supported by Boyce (2014) who opines that circulation policies as they relate to borrowing periods and billing need to be streamlined.

Library regulation on the restriction of access to certain sections or material may also affect returning of books to the library. Not only that, but the perceived limited number of items that can be lent out to a user depending on user category can also cause library users to keep the books beyond the stipulated lending period as well. For certain user categories such as undergraduate students, the number of books they can borrow at once is not increased. The use of special materials such as

reference materials, reserve collections, government documents, Africana, theses, and dissertations, etc., is restricted and there is no lending out for users to take such materials out of the library building. Such materials are considered essential and their relevance may cause a library user to cling to them beyond the stipulated lending period and they end up being charged penalty fees. In table 3, (77.7%) of the respondents agree that the number of books allowed to circulate should be increased.

UNZA Library allows undergraduate students to borrow four books for two weeks, members of the academic staff and postgraduate students may borrow eight (8) books for a period of three (3) months. The number of books may be increased for them to twelve (12) upon request. Members of the academic staff may also borrow two (2) current periodicals from the Serials section of the University Library for one (1) day. This finding agrees with the study by Zweibel and Lane (2012) who found that in institutions of higher learning, the loan period, and the number of books vary between staff and students.

Circulation regulations on penalty fees also have an effect on return of library books. When questioned as to whether regulations on the penalty for defaulters affect returning of books, (72.2%) of the respondents agreed. This finding is also supported by Kang, Wang & Wang (2019) who all agree that loan periods and other circulation policies should vary by borrower status.

At UNZA, a defaulter is charged two kwacha (ZMK2) per book per day for delaying to return it on the due date. This fine is seemingly very little and it is expected that library defaulters will choose not to respect the date due because they can easily afford this minimal penalty fee. It can safely be argued that it is often cheaper and easier for a borrower to fail to return books than to pay fines because fines are minimal and that there is no strict adherence to the regulations by the library. However, this contradicts the assertion that when a fine is too much, it will serve as a further deterrent from returning library books. It is important that while penalty fees are raised, this should be combined with strict adherence to the library regulations.

CONCLUSION

The results showed that library opening times to the public, perceived short loan periods, and a limited number of items that a person is allowed to borrow at a time, restricted access to certain library collections, and minimum penalty fees and failure by the library to strictly adhere to the regulations set out by themselves cause library users to return books late. In addition, an unconducive library environment for reading also causes the users to come to the library only if they want to borrow and consequently return the books late. Therefore, regulations set out by the library have an effect on returning of books by library users.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. One of the remedies of library fines and fees alone may not be enough and should be combined with the UNZA library strictly adhering to the regulations, especially library staff who are supposed to enforce the rules and regulations. This, it is hoped will deter would be library defaulters from returning books late.
2. Revising library membership fees and fines upward would also allow only would be library users from other Colleges and Universities without library facilities to use the library upon paying for membership which many people may not afford. At the moment library fees and fines are minimal and this influences the use of the library by anybody and also encourages late returning of books.
3. The library budget allocation must also improve so that library infrastructure and environmental conditions can improve. This will lead to the library environment being convenient for reading.

4. Further, the extended operational hours of the library must be sustained to allow the students and other library users to have ample time to use the library in the evenings and on weekends.

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