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Subject Librarianship in Kazakhstan: Exploring Information Literacy Skills, Functions, and Practices

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Abstract

Subject librarianship (SL) has long been practiced in academic libraries. But, with the transformation brought about by socio-cultural and technological factors, the roles have evolved. This article discussed the traditional role of Kazakh subject librarians, their current practices, and personal strategies in delivering services including information literacy in academic libraries. In Kazakhstan, subject librarians provide information literacy sessions and workshops dedicated for specific classes. A quantitative research method was adopted for this study using an online questionnaire for data gathering. It utilized purposive sampling to identify the competencies and performing tasks of subject librarians. It also analyzed how subject specialists promote their programs and relationship building strategies and investigates the differences and similarities with the available Western interpretations of subject librarianship. A total of 57 Kazakh university libraries and 80 librarians responded to the survey questions. Results of the research provides guidance for the implementation of subject librarianship practices of academic libraries in the region. To better serve their communities, subject librarians shall develop an excellent relationship, shared commitment, offer quality assistance, open communication, and always instils professionalism. Ultimately, the study reflects on the uniqueness of subject librarianship in Kazakhstan as well as its similarity in the practice of subject librarianship globally.

Keywords: subject librarianship, academic librarians, Kazakh librarians, post-Soviet librarianship, information literacy skills.

1. Introduction

Librarians' role in academic libraries is constantly evolving and expanding. They continue to provide services to effectively support the information needs of students, faculty, and researchers. Historically, subject librarianship was first mentioned in the 1920's at University College London Library (Woodhead, Martin, 1982), and became a popular program and started to be implemented after the Second World War (Hay, 1990). Fast forward at the present time, in Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev University (NU) Library developed and adopted a subject librarian's (SL) program in 2012, to provide subject-specific service to the NU community. A librarian with knowledge on information resources and research skills were assigned to each school and departments at NU. In case of a shortage of specialists, one librarian can be appointed as a subject liaison for two or three departments/schools at the same time. The main role of SL's includes, but is not limited to, supporting research needs, instructing Information Literacy sessions, and assisting in the creation of learning activities. They work with faculty and research units to encourage the progression of

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student research skills and aid with the practice of academic research at all levels. As Pinfield (Pinfield, 2001) stated, SL's play a significant role in the academic community by delivering both traditional and online services, also in supporting information literacy development. Traditional librarian tasks used to be mere technical processing with the product of the researchers, by cataloging and bibliography preparation. "The necessity of advanced library research assistance forced library professionals to facilitate the entire lifecycle of the research, teaching, and learning process" (Jaguszewski, Williams, 2013: 4). As Crawford (Crawford, 2012) noted the following: SL's liaise with designated departments; develop information resources and services; manage collection development; deliver information literacy and research skills programs; provide specialized information assistance; evolve liaison communication by participating in different university committees; engage in staff development activities, including presenting at conferences, writing articles and engaging in scholarly activities; support general inquiry service; promote library resources; develop a virtual community platform (Tang, Xia, 2010), and many other related duties. (Tang, Xia, 2010: 2)

Having in mind all the different requirements to the SL responsibilities, this research would like to understand if Kazakh library professionals practice the same things as presented in the literature. Thus, this study was meant to explore the current scenario of Kazakhstani university librarians with specific aims to answer the following research objectives:

1. identify SL's positions, roles, responsibilities, qualifications and skills;
2. probe on SL's strategies in promoting the program;
3. determine the existing relationships between SL's and academic units;
4. analyze these current practices as to relevance of the function to the needs of the changing times;
5. evaluate the similarity and distinctiveness of the roles that Kazakhstani SL's perform as pictured out in the literature.

2. Materials and methods

The study explored subject librarianship in Kazakhstan and has utilized purposive sampling to identify the competencies and performing tasks of the subject librarians. It also analyzes the results of how subject specialists promote their programs and relationship building strategies and investigates the differences and similarities with the available Western interpretations of subject librarianship.

The researchers developed an email in three languages (English, Kazakh, Russian) and sent it to the respondents as the best option to collect the responses during the COVID-19 quarantine. The email contained the consent form, an introduction of the study, purpose of the study and the link to the survey questions. The online survey tool, Google forms was utilized to design 10 questions, which were also provided in three languages (English, Kazakh, Russian).

The list of Kazakhstani university libraries for sampling was adopted from Egov.kz state platform. Egov.kz contains updated government data. The survey was sent to the university library email address (if available) and/or to the library director's email address. In addition, the link to an email with the survey questions was sent to the WhatsApp group of the library directors to ensure a wide reach of respondents. The email contained a request to share the survey with their library staff members. The online survey reached 57 Kazakh university libraries and 80 librarians responded to the survey questions.

The survey does not collect personal information and remains anonymous. Questions were a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions and are intended to explore the information needed to answer the research questions. Descriptive analysis was employed for each survey question. Graphs and tables were utilized to provide visual comparison.

3. Discussion

A review of literature showed that much has been discussed, studied and written about the subject librarians' role worldwide (Biddiscombe, 2002; Pinfield, 2001; Rodwell, 2001; Schoonover, 2014), and a little professional literature is written about Kazakhstani subject librarians program and roles of liaisons.

Emerging roles, competency, and qualifications

The role and responsibilities of subject librarians were defined by the Reference and User Services Association in their "Guidelines for Liaison Work in Managing Collections and Services"

(ALA, 2010) and has received feedback in many literature (Arendt, Lotts, 2012; Feldmann, 2006; Schloman et al., 1989). According to Tang (Tang, 2018), librarians' main concern is integrating information literacy skills. This skill is strongly part of how subject librarians impart knowledge to its users. Feather and Sturges (Feather, Sturges, 2003) defined SL's role as 'a librarian with special knowledge of, and responsibility for, a particular subject or subjects', although this definition is less extensive. Liaison work encompasses a variety of tasks, such as public relations, outreach and communication with user groups, reference services, information literacy and library use instruction, collection development, and bibliographic and research services in the librarian's specialty area. Today's subject and liaison librarianship is expanding beyond its traditional boundaries and includes collaborative digitization, setting up new open access journals, marketing, and even library building design (Crawford, 2012). More emphasis is also placed upon embedded librarianship and interdisciplinary research support, with a hybrid model that combines the expertise of liaisons and functional specialists (Jaguszewski, Williams, 2013).

SL's must possess highly scalable skills and reputable qualifications as well. The nature of the library work SL's require an in depth knowledge in information science. In a recent article in *Library Leadership & Management*, Schoonover, Kinsley, and Colvin (Schoonover et al., 2018) in Luckert and White (Luckert, White, 2020) mentioned that the professional development program has been discussed as an offshoot of identification of core values and competencies for liaison librarians. Library administrators found that while liaisons feel comfortable with research and teaching activities, they felt less confident in engaging faculty members in the areas of scholarly communications and digital tools. In a study of Reed and Carrol (Reed, Carrol, 2020) for library positions supporting health sciences research and teaching, qualifications in institutions studied still placed a greater emphasis on traditional librarian competencies (e.g., reference services, collection management, literature searching) rather than emerging areas of expertise, such as data science skills, grant experience, and research impact assessment. On qualifications, the fitness for purpose of professional education for library work (Chanetsa, Ngulube, 2017; Simmons, Corral, 2011) and how teacher-librarians should be developed (Bewick, Corral, 2010) has been given importance more than a decade ago.

Practices in Subject Librarianship: relevance and timeliness

Subject expertise is one proficiency expected from a subject or liaison librarian. This skill is also important for instructional librarians who should have a current knowledge of theories, methodologies, and topics in assignment (ACRL, 2008). Instructional librarians can be subject librarians at the same time, and they must possess the same set of skills. The remaining 11 skills can be found at the table below. In addition, the Reference and User Services Association, a division of the American Library Association (ALA, 2010), recognized the changing nature of liaison librarians and shared the revised guidelines in 2001. Liaison librarians involve themselves in three areas: development of the collection, identifying the special needs of the users, and creating formal and informal activities for its users (ALA, 2010). In a monograph authored by Moniz, Henry, and Eshleman (Moniz et al., 2014), the subject librarian's link between faculty, staff, and students are inevitable. Their presence is needed for them to attend faculty/staff meetings, to establish a personal connection. Before, during and after every meeting, consistent communication is essential to establish relationships. Their understanding of specific subject areas is an excellent way to discuss what sources of information are needed. Among other things expected from subject librarians are the ability to create online tutorials, collaborate with faculty in research projects, build a comprehensive collection of materials, provide information literacy classes, forward thinkers by being embedded into the system, produce library guides, and involve oneself in accreditation and opening of new courses.

In the United Kingdom, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), is the biggest network of librarians in the country. Subject librarians are often called academic liaison librarians (ALL) in the UK (Cooke et al., 2011). Just like in the United States, CILIP defines subject librarians as professionals who create tutorials and prepare subject guides in their area of expertise. They provide workshops and guide students through their courses (CILIP, n.d.). As libraries are becoming more user-oriented, the roles of subject librarians also shift to a functional approach (Hoodless, Pinfield, 2016). Subject librarians need to show their huge value to the university in facilitating many roles in collection development and teaching and learning including research support and information literacy.

Table 1. Summary of SL practices

<i>Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators: A Practical Guide (ACRL/ALA/USA)</i>	<i>CILIP Definition (UK)</i>
administrative skills	the go-to person for enquiries
assessment and evaluation skills	to produce tutorials and subject guides
communication skills	liaising with academic teaching staff
curriculum knowledge	running workshops
Information Literacy integration skills	excellent interpersonal skills
instructional design skills	knowledge of the subject area
leadership skills	An accredited postgraduate qualification in library and information science
planning skills	
presentation skills	
promotion skills	
subject expertise	
teaching skills	

Subject Librarianship in Kazakhstan

Subject librarians are present in Kazakhstan. In an article written by J. Yap et al (Yap et al., 2018), subject librarians hold information literacy sessions and various orientation and workshops dedicated for specific classes. One module they actively teach is citation and referencing. They are also given the task to request and purchase library materials to build the collection specific to their areas. In an earlier study by King, Dowding, and Pflager (King et al., 2013), subject librarianship already exists in one Kazakh university where the main function is to deliver services as they were assigned into different schools. The students are aware and introduced to their own subject librarians so they may ask a consultation or help them with any subject-specific questions (Yap, 2020). The library of Suleyman Demirel University also started introducing subject librarians as early as 2020 (SDU Library, 2021). Now, they have four subject librarians while Nazarbayev University Library has nine. However, as mentioned earlier, only a few studies have been made about subject librarianship in Kazakhstan or Central Asia.

Faculty-Librarian synergy

To establish a good rapport with the faculty and students, subject librarians must immerse oneself to the area of responsibility. Trust comes from building a good relationship and understanding their user needs (Hoffmann, Carlisle-Johnston, 2021). A new subject librarianship shall be introduced to the community either by sending an email or by conducting an event solely for the purpose of getting to know each other. Showing enthusiasm by starting a conversation and asking what their needs are is a good practice. Get to know what the faculty specializes in or area of expertise. A subject librarian can start researching these areas and offer more materials that are not yet available in the library's collection. As Diaz and Mandernach (Diaz, Mandernach, 2017) noted, building a relationship with members of the community starts when a great collaboration opens for new and additional projects. It gets even better when more projects are offered to the subject librarian since they saw your sincere service for them. Subject librarians also get to understand the

teaching and learning needs of faculty and students (Johnson, 2020). When good collaboration happens, trust is gained.

Strategies in promoting SL programs

Integrating subject librarians in the core academic work might be a struggle for some. This was echoed by Hoodless and Pinfield (Hoodless, Pinfield, 2018) as they see that there needs to be a lot to be done to promote the services of subject librarians as they are seen less by the university managers.

Basco, Avila, and Norris (Basco et al., 2019), presented ways on how subject librarians can be more visible and effective.

1. Becoming mobile – getting out of the library, visit assigned academic departments, participate in department meeting, one-on-one meeting with faculty in their offices
2. Additional outreach initiatives – create department newsletter, specialized workshops, etc.
3. Subject Librarians strives to facilitate invitations for meetings and collaborations

4. Results

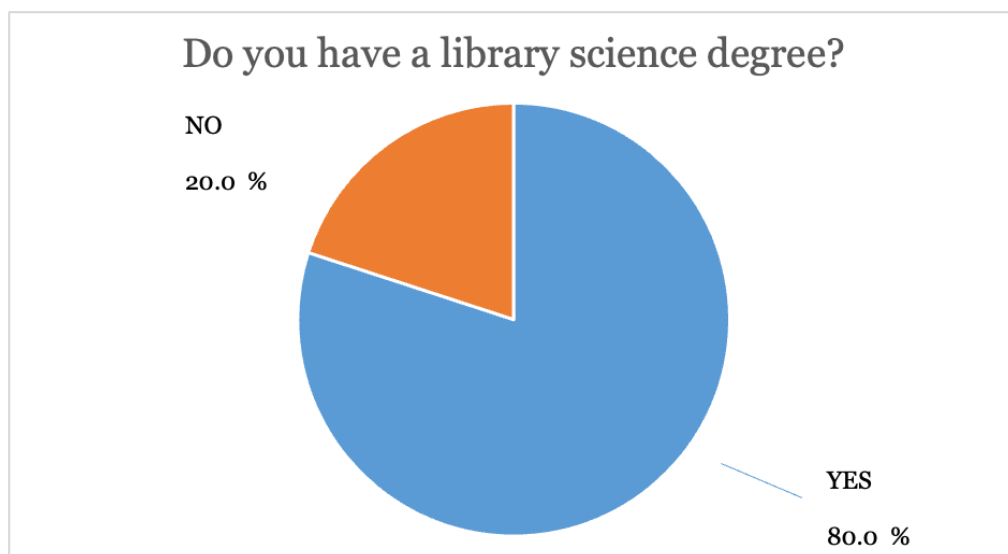


Fig. 1. Academic Profile of Kazakh Librarians

It is noteworthy to ask the level of knowledge of each library professional working in academic libraries. By preparing library workers with LIS education, we can assess the current scenario. According to the survey results shown on Figure 1 above, 80.0 % of the respondents have a library (and information) science degree, and the rest of the group owns diplomas in other fields. This number may give a positive image of library workers with LIS degrees in academic libraries; however, we can't measure how many among the library staff in each academic library have the degree. The results point out that those who reached the survey link and accomplished the form at least have enough preparation to become a librarian and may have understood the specific roles of subject librarianship.

Figure 2 shows the actual designations of each librarian who responded to the survey. According to survey respondents, 50.7 % (32) of them hold the position of a reference librarian while 23.9 % (18) are officially called subject librarians. Meanwhile, another 26.9 % (14) identify themselves as research librarians while others represent the position of library directors, department heads, or deputy directors. Surprisingly, 1.5 % represents the number of librarians who do all the positions mentioned as options in the survey.

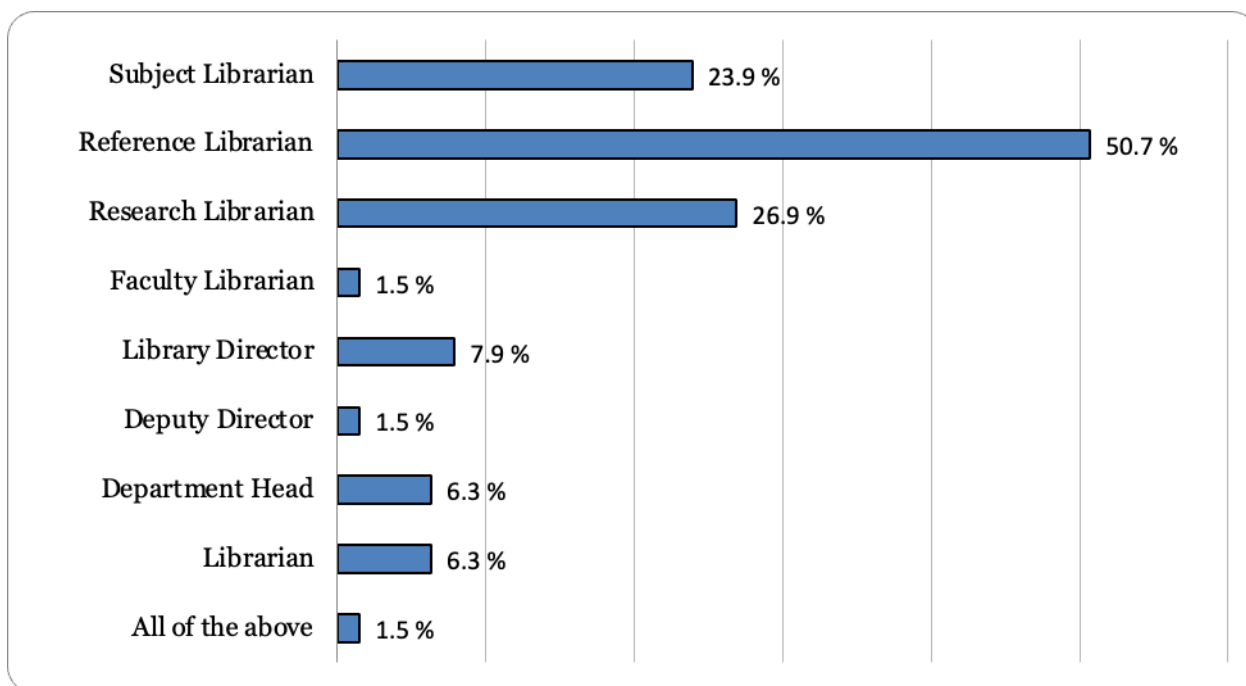


Fig. 2. Designations

Figure 3 revealed that 53 (66.0 %) individuals identified that they provide literature search service, i.e., guiding the user on locating the needed information and/or instructing them with the search techniques. Another service provided by respondents which summed 49 (61.0 %) librarians - is collaborating with the designated departments and schools via email or phone, face-to-face consultations and attending different departmental events and meetings. Almost 35 (44.0 %) respondents indicated that they provide the following services to the school/department members:

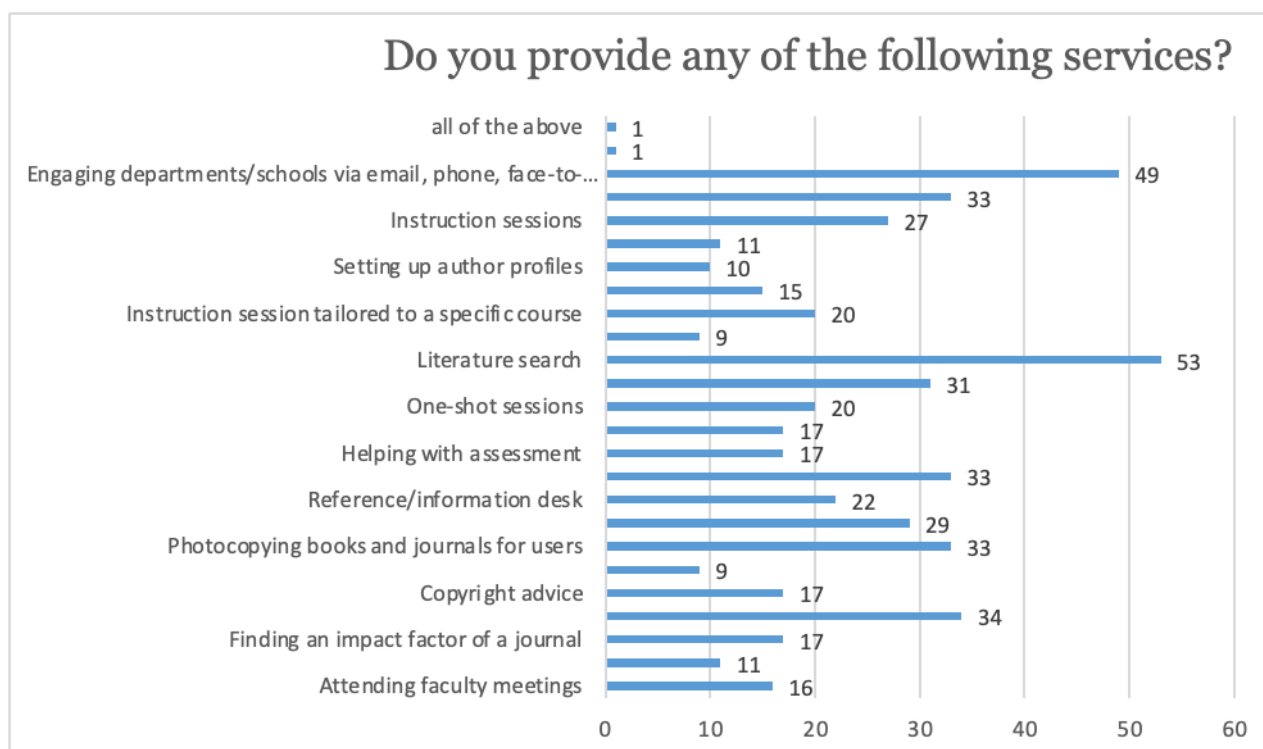


Fig. 3. Scope of Responsibility as SL

- Citation analysis
- Chat/online reference services
- Searching using Google
- Photocopying books and journals for users
- Collection development/ordering items

Another 30 (38.0 %) respondents replied that they deliver such services as interlibrary loan, instruction sessions and sessions requested by faculty members to the appointed department.

Reference and information desk service and one-shot instruction sessions are other services provided by 20 (25.0 %) individuals of the survey participants.

According to the survey results, only 15 (19.0 %) respondents provide the following services to their users:

- Developing/ designing the session
- Finding an impact factor of a journal
- Putting content in the Institutional repository
- Copyright advice
- Helping with assessment
- Attending faculty meetings.

It turned out that 9 (11.0 %) respondents cover the services such as creating library instructional guides, assisting with setting up the author profiles, marking the assignments and credit bearing courses, as well as working on research projects. The most interesting fact is that none of the respondents carry books physically in their libraries.

Is being a subject/liaison librarian your:

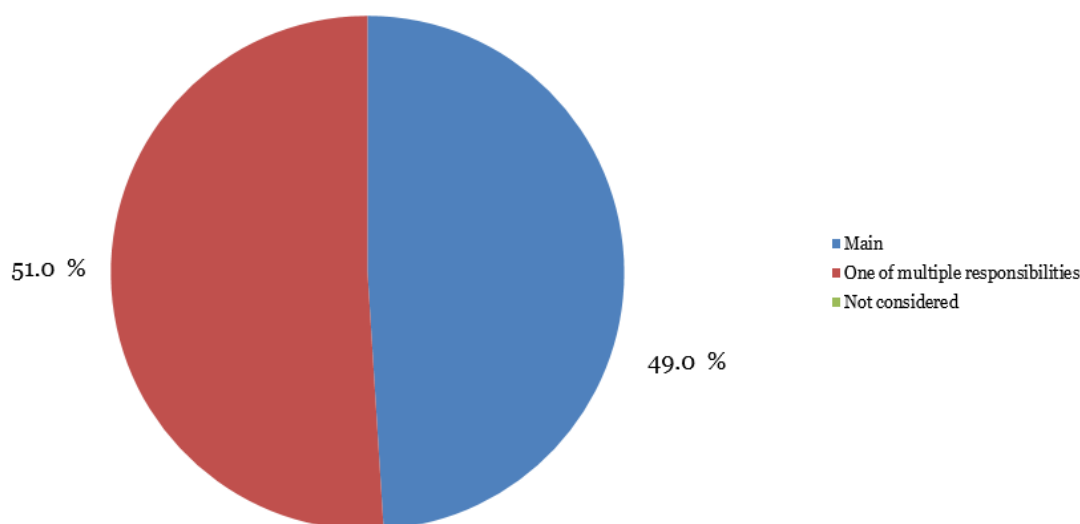


Fig. 4. Responsibilities

According to the survey respondents as shown in figure 2, 39 (49.0 %) of them indicated that being a subject librarian is only one of the multiple responsibilities, and the rest of the group, 37 (46.0 %) noted that it is their main responsibility. As their main responsibility, they can perform more focused activities as subject librarians. The rest 4 (5.0 %) individuals did not reply to this question at all.

Figure 4 showed that the subject knowledge is the most important qualification for the subject librarian, which was stated by 58 (73.0 %) participants. In the advent of information overload and misinformation, subject librarians should also be the authority in helping users to be critical thinkers. Various fields of discipline face disinformation. One way to combat information disorders is to teach students how to analyze fact from the fake, thus incorporating fact checking as one of their courses while teaching information literacy. As Lebid et al. (Lebid et al., 2020) puts it, fact checking is a fundamental principle of media and information literacy. The second essential skill according to the respondents is to have enough knowledge in IT uttered by 50 (62.0 %) participants. The master's degree diploma on library and information science was indicated as the third significant qualification for the subject specialists by 41 (51.0 %). Participation in conferences

and professional organizations will also provide opportunities for subject librarians to increase their IT skills as well as expand their networks (Pothier et al., 2019).

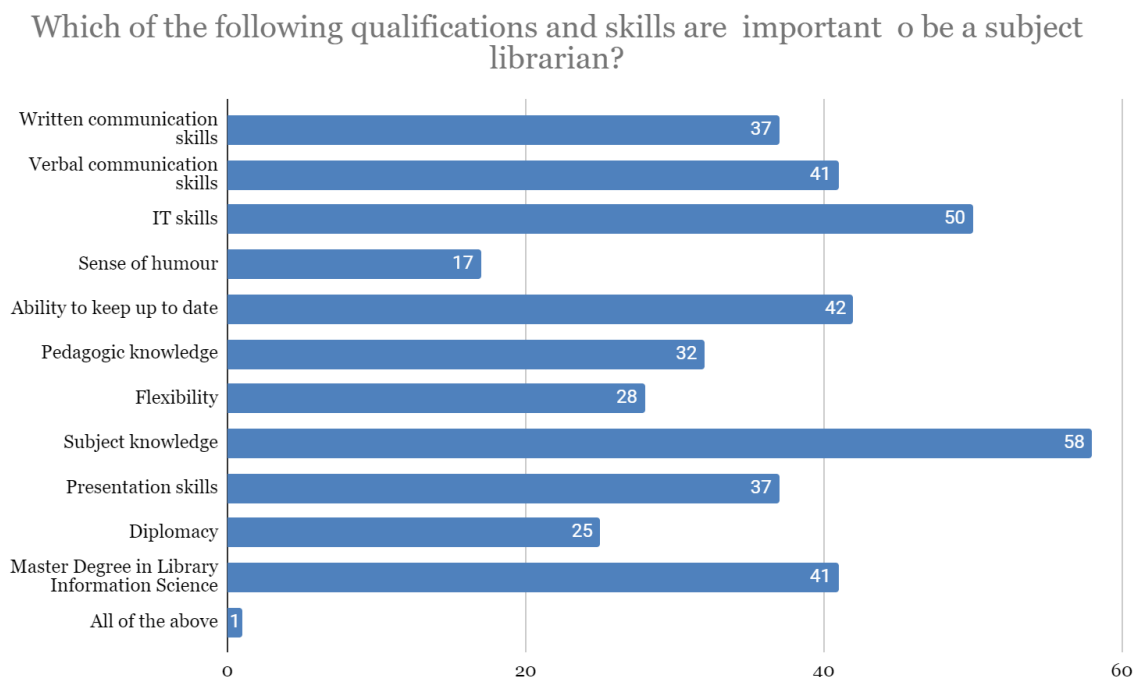


Fig. 5. Perceived Importance on Qualifications and Skill as Subject Librarian

42 (10.0 %) of the respondents require “ability to keep up to date” and “verbal communication skills” from subject librarians and the presentation skills and written communication skills are indicated by 37 (9.0 %) of the respondents. According to the respondents the pedagogical knowledge, diplomacy and flexibility are needed less than other skills, only 28 (6.0%) of the participants have noted them as needed skills. Sense of humor was chosen as the least important skill of a specialist, 17 (4.0 %) individuals marked it as obligatoriness. Authors would like to highlight the fact that none of the respondents choose all the above options to these questions, which means it is not anticipated to find a subject librarian responding to all the listed competencies and skills.

The next question of the survey asked the respondents on the strategies of communication and collaboration with the designated departments and schools, and the majority, 48 (60.0 %) of them indicated attending the department meeting as the main strategy (see table 5). Sending library related newsletters is another strategy of 45 (56.0 %) respondents. Different types of emails were the further steps of 32 (40.0 %) subject specialists. 34 (42.0 %) library professionals prefer cold-call or pop-in methods for relationship building purposes. A bit less number of librarians, exactly 31 (38.0 %) members, are included in the department email groups, and another 33 (41.0 %) respondents boasted of attending informal events and parties of the department members. Vendor presentations are also used by 24 (30.0 %) respondents as a tool to build relationships with the departments. 23 (28.0 %) individuals use advertisements and flyers to inform the faculty members, and 10 (12.0 %) librarians use blogs. Only 9 (11.0 %) respondents utilize the LibGuides as a communication and information channel. Meanwhile another 9 (11.0 %) librarians create posters for the reporting and announcing purposes. The apotheosis of the results is that only 1 (1.0 %) librarian uses individual consultations to reach out to the school representatives.

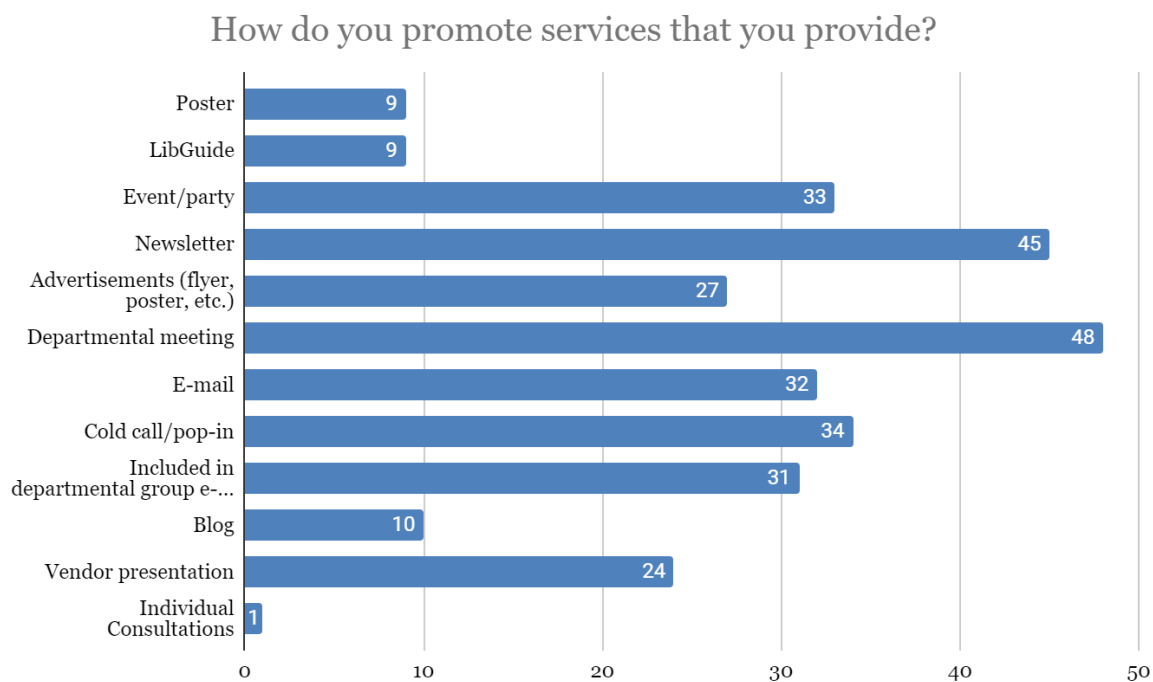


Fig. 6. Strategies in Promoting SL programs

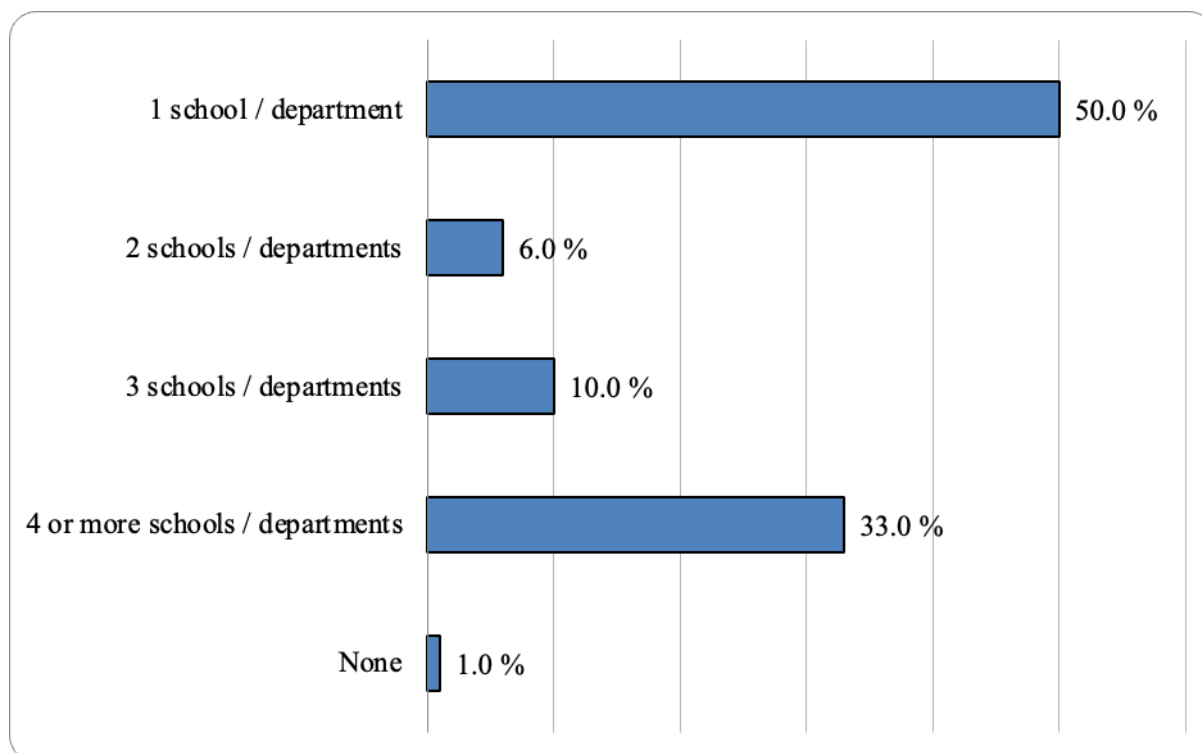


Fig. 7. Number of Departments Served

As shown in Figure 7, 50.0 % of the respondents support one school as a subject librarian, while 33.0 % replied that they cover more than four schools simultaneously. 10.0 % of the participants supervise three schools at the same time, while 6.0 % of them assist two schools. One of the respondents indicated that currently does not support any school.

Most of the respondents (33.0 %) rated their relationship with the designated departments as “Good” (Figure 8). Almost the same amount of the respondents (32.0 %) evaluated their

relationship with the departments as “Very strong”, which means they have good and strong relationships with the department faculty members. 26.0 % (23) respondents assess their level of relationship as mixed and do have several contacts among the faculty members they can reach out. Six individuals (7.0 %) replied that their relationship is low and not effective as they wish, and only two librarians confess on struggling to get the response from faculty members.

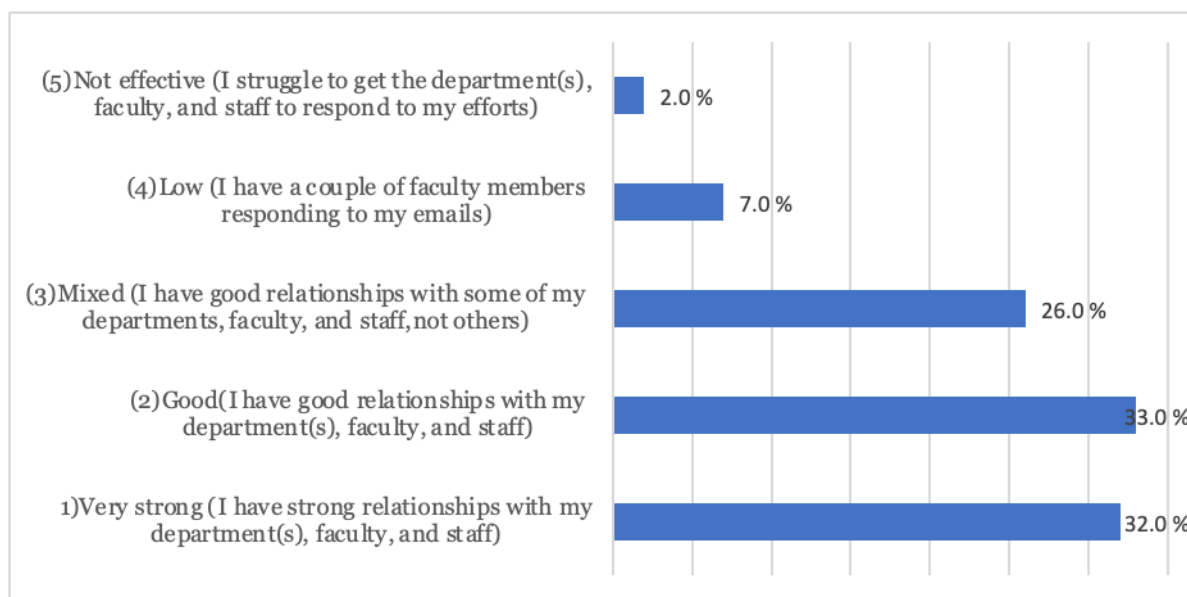


Fig. 8. Relationship with the Department/s

Relationship-building Strategies

It is apparent that subject librarians must strengthen their bond with the users they serve. Based on the survey responses, various strategies are needed to establish a good rapport between the librarian and the academic community. These strategies can also be great characteristics and skills that subject librarians should possess:

- a. Develop an excellent relationship – To make this happen, gain the trust and respect of the faculty members by reaching out to them. Start a conversation via email and set a meeting.
- b. Commitment – A subject librarian who works beyond an extra mile will make a mark in the profession. Provide them options and do not settle for just enough.
- c. Offer assistance – Subject librarians’ priority are the students and faculty. If there are opportunities to offer help, volunteer. This will be beneficial to both parties.
- d. Communication – An open communication will provide a subject librarian an idea of what the users want. The small meetings will always be an avenue to know what they feel about the services you offer. Get feedback to improve the services and programs.
- e. Competency – This skill is very important on a professional level. The position you hold gives you a responsibility to take your job on a higher level. A competent subject librarian starts building not only a relationship but also a reputation.
- f. Embedded librarianship – Subject librarians focus on a specific field. Having in-depth knowledge about the field, understanding the research interests of the faculty members, awareness of top-ranking journals in the subject, among other things are the best strategies to build a strong relationship.

Basco, Avila, and Norris are correct. To be visible and effective subject librarians, they must get out of the library and be mobile. They should understand what is happening in their own schools or departments and always be involved. They must take an active role and be aggressive. This might be something Kazakh librarians have to realize. They must be empowered. Library leaders should encourage them to participate rather than wait for something to happen.

Kazakh librarians believe that subject knowledge is an important asset one must possess to become a subject librarian. They may be knowledgeable but the services they offer are limited. Only

2.0 % creates library instructional guides and is part of research projects. Extended offering of assistance is really needed to establish more relationships.

While 16.0 % attends departmental meetings, only 5.0 % conducts instructional sessions and a very small amount of time is devoted to developing/ designing the session, giving copyright advice, and helping to find out journal rankings.

5. Conclusion

The research paper was aimed to explore the scope of competencies, skills and roles of the Kazakhstani academic librarians serving as subject librarians and to investigate the similarities and differences with the western practices. Results have shown that most of the respondents maintain and perform similar services as compared to how it was done in the west but still some services remain less popular among the Kazakh experience. For instance, creating LibGuides and implementing IL credit - bearing courses, as well as assisting researchers with developing an author profile are not provided by most of the Kazakhstani subject librarians.

Participants have shared their thoughts and recommendations aroused from open-ended questions, and most of the suggestions were similar. They agreed that SLs in Kazakhstan experience the following situations:

Job vacancies for librarians in Kazakhstan pertaining to the specific duties and responsibilities of SLs are not properly advertised; No library professionals with the needed qualifications in Kazakhstani labor market;

There is not enough support from stakeholders concerning budget to hire additional subject specialist;

There is a need to develop and train librarians in building a strong relationship with the community they serve;

Higher educational institutions in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan should popularize librarianship in the labor market;

Encourage the young to have an interest with library and information science and making the profession more attractive;

Provide enough time and resources for subject librarians to realize and fulfill the required tasks by supporting their intellectual and practical development.

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