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Culture and Competencies: A Multi-Country Examination of Reference Service Competencies

Abstract: Reference librarians have the opportunity to interact with patrons and colleagues of many different backgrounds, languages, and cultures as a result of our increasingly interconnected and peripatetic world. In order to provide the best possible service to these varied communities, reference librarians should understand some of the culture differences that exist across countries, and in particular, the differences in the way that reference services are conceived and delivered in different countries. This study explores some of these differences in reference services by surveying current practitioners in thirteen countries to find out which competencies they believe are most important for academic reference librarians right now, and in the near future. The results of this study highlight some important commonalities and differences, and could help reference librarians to manage and meet the expectations of their international patrons, and perhaps help them to prepare for an international job experience of their own. Academic reference librarians may be interested to see the extent to which their counterparts in other countries face similar challenges and expectations with regard to delivering reference services. Teaching faculty in library science programs will be interested to understand reference competencies and expectations in other countries, especially as they teach greater numbers of international students or consider collaborating with international colleagues. In addition, an international understanding is important in developing students who can compete in a global job market.

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Introduction

Improvements in travel and technology, including devices and formats for communication such as smartphones and videoconferencing, are contributing to an increasingly connected and interconnected world. Business is routinely conducted across the globe, and as evidenced by the recent economic crises, global economies are increasingly tied to one another. In higher education, increased globalization has a number of specific impacts. In response to the increased flow of global information, many schools are developing learning outcomes around the concept of global citizenship. Colleges and universities are also seeing greater numbers of international students, whose learning styles, understanding of issues of academic integrity such as plagiarism, and language abilities vary widely from those of the home students, forcing everyone to take a wider view of education needs. Collaboration is taking place not only among different institutions in the same country, but across institutions in different countries as well. Similarly, it is not uncommon for faculty and staff to take jobs in different countries, either for short periods, or on a more long-term basis. One impact of the globalization of education is a need for cultural sensitivity, or an understanding of differences in customs, values, and traditions in different countries, and an ability to work with those differences.

Reference librarians must understand and be prepared to work within the global economy. While definitions and roles may vary somewhat across countries, reference librarians are often front-line staff who spend much of their time interacting with the public. As such, they need the skills to work with faculty, staff, and students from around the world, and to align their activities and goals with the global mission of their institutions. Indeed, as a special issue of *Library Management* (Pors 2007) demonstrates, librarians are directly participating in and experiencing internationalization by taking jobs in different countries. Despite the growing attention to globalization in higher education, academic libraries, and reference services in particular, remain largely inwardly focused. Few studies have explored how reference services are delivered across different countries and cultures, or compared the job responsibilities and expected competencies or qualifications of academic reference librarians in these countries.

The purpose of this study is to address this gap by exploring and comparing expectations of academic reference librarians internationally. In particular, this study examines the following questions: are expectations around reference competencies consistent across different countries? If so, can an international standard or core list

of competencies for reference librarians be determined? On the other hand, are there statistically significant differences among different nations with regard to reference competencies and qualifications? If so, which competencies are preferred by which countries, and is there a discernible cultural pattern? The results of this study have numerous implications. By determining whether an international standard of reference competencies exists and identifying any important cross-cultural differences in competencies, this study will help reference librarians to manage and meet the expectations of their international patrons, and perhaps help them to prepare for an international job experience of their own.

Academic reference librarians may be interested to see the extent to which their counterparts in other countries face similar challenges and expectations with regard to delivering reference services. Teaching faculty in library science programs will be interested to understand reference competencies and expectations in other countries, especially as they teach greater numbers of international students or consider collaborating with international colleagues. In addition, an international understanding is important in developing students who can compete in a global job market. Finally, by identifying areas of commonality and difference in the area of academic reference services, this study might inspire further collaboration among colleagues from different countries to continue to explore cultural differences in the approach to reference services.

Literature Review

In an increasingly global society, it is necessary to develop cultural competencies and understandings in order to take advantage of collaborative opportunities and to avoid miscommunications and potentially awkward situations. The business world has been especially affected by globalization and internationalization, and librarians can support patron efforts to develop cultural competencies by ensuring that collections contain resources to support their work in different countries (Aman and Aman 1987; McGuigan and Zabel 2002; McSwiney 2002). In addition, however, librarians must develop their own cultural competencies and abilities to communicate and interact across cultures. Librarians must be prepared to communicate and interact with patrons from diverse backgrounds, to collaborate with professionals in other countries, or possibly even to take jobs in other countries (McSwiney 2002; Osa, Nyana, and Ogbaa 2006; Montiel-Overall 2009). Nor does internationalization only affect work

with people. Changes in technology and increasing interconnectedness have impacted how information is managed and exchanged. These changes, in turn, affect the work of librarians and “call for a review of assumptions relating to issues such as cross-cultural communication, patterns of information-seeking and approaches to learning” (McSwiney 2002, 3). Reaching out to the international librarian community may help the profession to grow and meet these new needs.

Calls for librarians to develop a broader and more multi-national perspective are not new. In the 1980s, Katz (1987) and Aman and Aman (1987) lamented the limited perspective of American librarians. They called on librarians to develop cultural competencies by creating international collections and learning more about sources of information from other countries and in other languages. Additionally, some writers recommend that study of international or comparative librarianship should be integrated into the standard curriculum of library science programs (Aman and Aman 1987; Josey 1991; Abdullahi and Kajberg 2004). As globalization has only increased in the intervening decades, so has the need for professionals to develop cultural competency and sensitivity. Librarians can increase their competencies across international borders by first becoming aware of their own cultural perspectives and inherent biases, and then seeking and creating opportunities to learn more about other cultures. Such learning could be either formal or informal, and could include conversations with people from different backgrounds, learning new languages, travel, or seeking out professional development and continuing education opportunities (McSwiney 2002; Montiel-Overall 2009).

International Comparisons

Although small, a body of literature comparing library services across different countries exists, with some attention to cultural differences in organization and delivery of services such as reference. Many differences across countries arise from cultural variations in interpersonal interactions and communication, as well as differences in perceptions and expectations of professional librarians, which can impact working relationships.

A number of articles note cultural variations in how librarians relate to patrons, and patrons’ understanding of the role of librarians. Indeed, there are marked cultural differences in information-seeking, including how questions are asked of librarians and expectations of service levels. Education in Anglo-American countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia empha-

sizes critical thinking, analysis, and independent learning. As a result, patrons of academic libraries in these cultures are often expected to be self-directed, and the role of the librarian is as a facilitator and guide. In cultures which focus on memorization and rote learning, patrons might view librarians as authoritative and expect them to offer definitive answers to questions, rather than assistance in the information-seeking process (McSwiney 2002; Hughes 2010). In some countries, these expectations have traditionally been reinforced by layouts that include closed stacks and an emphasis on the librarian’s role in protecting and preserving physical collections (Robinson 2007, 256; Schmidt 2007).

The role of the academic library in relation to faculty also differs by country. For instance, Zhang and McCarthy (2005) contrasted approaches to reference services at a British and a Chinese academic library. They found that over the last decade, British reference librarians have shifted their emphasis from supporting faculty research through alerting services and literature reviews to a greater focus on students. Librarian interactions with faculty at the British university center on how the library can support their students’ learning. The role of subject specialist is a relatively new one in Chinese academic libraries, and the researchers found that these liaison librarians are highly dedicated to supporting the needs and interests of faculty, whom they consider “VIP users.”

A multi-national comparison of virtual reference transcripts found some variance in response time and tone or manner. Researchers found that responses from South African libraries consistently took the longest, and only met stated response times 50% of the time (Olszewski and Rumbaugh 2010). The study also found different expectations in terms of foreign language communications, with some countries’ librarians communicating with patrons in two or three different languages, while others including the libraries in English-speaking countries communicated exclusively in that country’s native language (Rumbaugh and Olszewski 2007). In addition, the tone of the online or email exchange can differ greatly. Researchers characterized responses from two of the countries as extremely polite, while three others were considered brusque or even rude (Rumbaugh and Olszewski 2007). Some variance might arise from inherent differences in approach to question-asking, with some cultures favoring circumlocution and an indirect approach in contrast to the Western culture’s more straightforward or even terse style (McSwiney 2002). McSwiney (2002) notes issues of communication can arise even when the librarian and patron speak the same language, due to differences in accents and use of idioms, jargon, and colloquialisms.

Reference Competencies

While international and cross-cultural comparisons of competencies are rare, several countries have developed bodies of literature or sets of standards around reference competencies. In the United States, the American Library Association Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) maintains a set of guidelines of professional competencies for reference librarians (RUSA 2003). This framework outlines the major areas of knowledge, responsibility, and qualifications for reference librarians, and includes such abilities as critical thinking, responsiveness to user needs, collaboration, and assessment of services. According to RUSA, competent reference librarians should be able to communicate effectively using different media outlets, and should not only answer questions but disseminate knowledge by offering patrons instruction in the use of resources and evaluation of information.

A survey of subject librarians in South Africa identified 12 major competency areas, which included assistance with information retrieval, instruction, awareness of current events, statistical record-keeping and reporting, communication skills, and management skills (Neerpath, Leach, and Hoskins 2006). A study of Nigerian libraries highlights the importance of customer service and communication skills, ability to use technology, and both general and subject-specific knowledge (Omoniyi 2002). Similar, but more broadly-based surveys were carried out in Kuwait, Oman, Singapore and Pakistan. While these surveys looked to identify important competencies within the library field as a whole, delivery of reference services was rated as important in surveys in Kuwait, Singapore and Pakistan. All three countries identified as important other related competencies such as customer service, communication, and technology skills (Anwar and Al-Ansari 2002; Mahmood 2003; Khoo 2005; Jabr 2010). The LIANZA (Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa) Body of Professional Knowledge includes reference skills as part of its core competencies for professional registration (LIANZA 2012) Looking ahead to the next decade, a survey of Thai librarians indicates that customer service, instruction, leadership, facility with technology, and knowledge of information sources will be among the core competencies expected of academic librarians (Tanloet and Tuamsuk 2011).

Though not limited to reference services, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA 2005) offers a statement of core knowledge for librarians which includes information seeking and access, information literacy education, and communication skills. As part of a project on developing the future workforce, the 8Rs Cana-

dian Libraries Human Resources Study identified the top 10 out of 23 most important and most difficult to fill competencies for librarians. Among the top rated skills were leadership and management, communication and people skills, and technology skills (Ingles *et al.* 2005). A similar project in the United Kingdom came to analogous conclusions, highlighting user focus and support as a major area for skills development, and identifying competencies such as leadership, technology, research, and communication skills as highly sought by employers (Fisher 2004).

These articles demonstrate an interest in examining and identifying core competencies for library professionals in general, and reference librarians in particular. Taken together, they offer some different perspectives on those competencies, but most of the literature is limited to a single nation's viewpoint, which fails to put these competencies in an international context, or draw comparisons across different countries. The present study attempts to fill that gap by analyzing core reference competencies across 13 nations based on surveys of practicing reference librarians in each country.

Research Methods and Procedures

The goal of this study was to gather feedback from practicing reference professionals in academic libraries across a variety of countries, in order to determine which competencies current professionals believe to be most important in their own professional environment. A second aim of the study is to compare results across the participating countries to determine similarities and differences in the practice and expectations of academic reference librarians in different countries. In particular, this study examines the following questions:

- Across different countries, which competencies do academic reference librarians believe to be most important for reference librarians now? Which do they predict will be most important in the near future?
- How are the competencies expected of academic reference librarians similar and different across different countries? Are any of these differences statistically significant?
- What might be inferred about the cultural differences in academic reference services from these similarities and differences?

The original survey on which this study is based took place in the United States in December 2010. The survey instrument was developed by two of the authors (Saun-

ders and Jordan) in order to collect feedback and opinions about important competencies from professional reference librarians in both public and academic libraries in the United States, and relied on the definitions of reference transactions and reference work developed by RUSA. Specifically, RUSA states that reference transactions are “information consultations in which library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate, and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs,” while reference work, more broadly, “includes reference transactions and other activities that involve the creation, management, and assessment of information or research resources, tools, and services” (RUSA 2008). The original survey (available at <http://tinyurl.com/8barxhx> and Appendix) asked practicing reference librarians to reflect on a list of competencies which had been broken down into three broad categories: general, technical, and interpersonal. Participants were asked to choose all competencies that they believe to be important for current professionals, and to choose the three most important in each category. They were then asked to predict which competencies would be important in the next ten years, and again which three in each category would be most important. Finally, participants were asked open-ended questions regarding any competencies they saw lacking or in need of improvement in new hires. The original list of competencies was created by the researchers from the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association (ALA) Professional Competencies and Behavioral Guidelines for reference librarians and from reviews of the professional literature.

About six months after the original study was completed, a third colleague, (Kurbanoglu), joined the two original researchers, and the decision was made to execute an international study. Collaborators were recruited from various countries based on personal knowledge, recommendations from other colleagues, and requests to international library associations. For instance, the three originating researchers contacted colleagues with whom they had personal knowledge and invited them to join the study and, in some cases, those colleagues suggested other potential partners in other countries. In addition, one researcher contacted the Mortensen Center for International Library Programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to identify additional researchers. Efforts were made to recruit as widely as possible, but there are a number of gaps in the geographic representation. In part, this may have been because of time constraints. The three original researchers set a timeline for completion, as well as guidelines for the writing and publication of the study, to which partners agreed before joining the study.

For instance, one colleague from the United Kingdom and one from Estonia agreed to participate, but then were unable to execute the research within the time frame and therefore were not included in this analysis.

Each participant translated the original study into their own language. Since most survey participants would only speak the native language of their country, translation from English was necessary. However, researchers made every effort to keep the meaning and intent of the original survey. Other than translation, changes to the original questions were kept to a minimum and made only when absolutely necessary. For instance, while the Master’s degree is required for professional librarians in the United States, in many countries professional librarians practice at the Bachelor’s level. Therefore, a question about the necessity of a second Master’s degree had to be changed for these countries to ask instead about the necessity of any degree beyond the Bachelor of Library Science. All changes centered on demographic questions.

Content questions around competencies were kept the same aside from being translated. It is important to note that the original research was developed for a United States audience and thus reflects that perspective. As with the original American study, this research uses the RUSA conceptualizations of reference work, and assumes that one of the primary roles of reference librarians is to interact with patrons and provide answers to questions and instruction in the use of resources. Similarly, the competency list was developed primarily from the guidelines produced by RUSA, an American association, and supplemented largely by literature produced in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. In some cases, certain competencies might not be reflective of expectations in other countries, and translations of the competencies was challenging. Thus, the American perspective and English language orientation must be acknowledged as limitations to this study.

Methods of sampling varied, and depended largely on size and general demographics of academic institutions in each country. Because there are so many academic institutions in the United States, the original study, relied on a random sample of up to 10 academic libraries (excluding ARL libraries) from each state, drawn from the list of institutions at LibWeb (http://lists.webjunction.org/libweb/Academic_main.html). In many countries, however, the list of academic institutions is much smaller, making a census of the entire population possible and indeed desirable in order to ensure enough data points to draw meaningful conclusions. Thus, each of the other participating countries used the census method to survey all institutions of higher education.

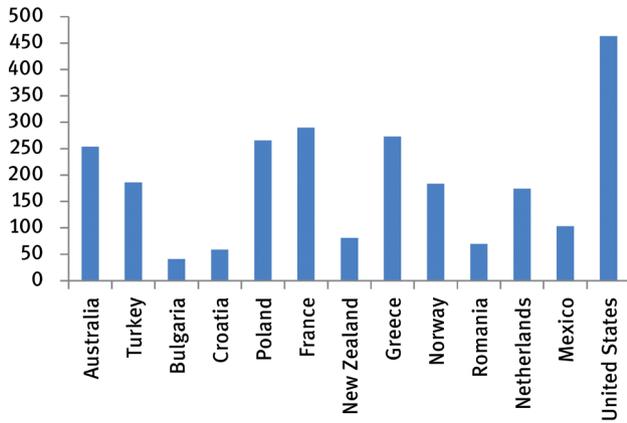


Figure 1: Total Responses Received by Country

Findings

The heart of this study focuses on which skills and competencies professionals believe to be most important for current reference librarians. Survey respondents were given three lists of competencies – general, technology, and interpersonal skills – and asked to choose all the skills they believe to be important for those practicing reference now. Overall, the survey responses indicate a high level of consistency across the different countries in terms of the top two or three necessary qualifications for reference librarians in current practice, and those expected to be most important in the near future, as well as some revealing differences. The next sections offer a breakdown of the quantitative findings of the survey, beginning with a brief overview of the demographics of the respondents.

Demographics

The survey garnered a total of 2,444 responses from 13 different countries. Figure 1 shows the total number of responses received by country. Of the 2,444 total responses received, 79.3% were female, with Bulgaria having the highest percentage of female respondents at 100% and Turkey having the lowest at 54.8%. The demographic breakdown supports the idea that librarianship is still a female-dominated profession in most countries. However, because the survey was a census in most countries, and it is uncertain how representative the respondents are of the larger population, we cannot generalize these findings. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of respondents by gender and country.

The age range of survey respondents varied a little more widely, probably reflecting the time to complete the

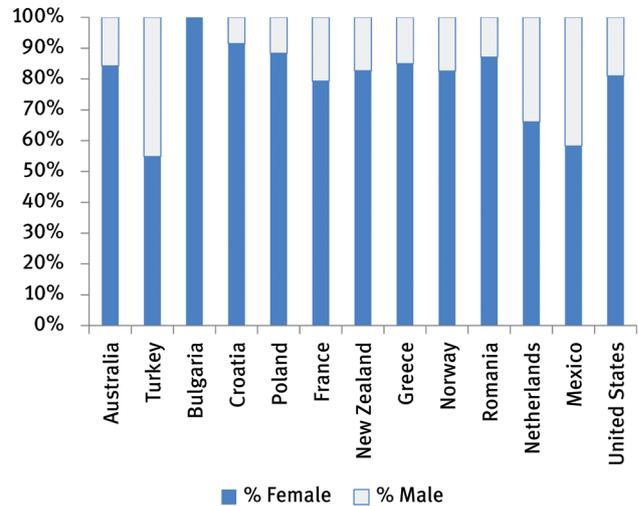


Figure 2: Gender of Respondents by Country

different professional requirements in different countries. For instance, while a Master's of Library Science is considered the minimum qualification for a professional librarian in the United States, in Turkey a librarian can practice with a Bachelor's degree. That said, the majority of participants are between the ages of 31 and 40 (28.0%), closely followed by those in the 41–50 age range (26.0%), and the 51–60 age range (24.3%). Turkey had the youngest librarians on average, at 34.9 years, while New Zealand had the highest average age at 49.4. It is worth noting that only 52 respondents from all countries are under the age of 25, while only 6 are over the age of 71.

Overview of Competencies

Survey respondents were given three lists of competencies and asked to indicate any they believe to be important for academic reference librarians practicing now, and then any they believe will be important in the next 5 to 10 years. Participants could choose as many as they wanted from each list. The tallies of votes for each skill area were ordered within each country from the highest to lowest vote count and were assigned a rank. The resulting ranks were then tested to determine if there are similarities or differences among the countries in how they ranked each competency.

A research assistant with a strong background in statistics was hired to analyze and test the data. The data gathered is ordinal and as noted above, sampling methods and population sizes varied widely across countries, resulting in non-normal data. Thus, the most appropri-

ate methods to analyze these data were non-parametric: skills were examined using a Friedman test to determine if the median rank for skills across all countries could be assumed to be the same; rankings of skills for each country for current skills and future skills were examined for differences using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test for two related samples. Data for each skill were examined using Kendall's rank correlation coefficient to determine similarities and differences across all countries' judgments of the importance of skills. The following sections examine the results of these tests in each of the three competency areas.

General

Within the general skills, there is a considerable consistency in the top and bottom ranked skills. Search skills are clearly considered the most important, ranked highest or tied for highest in ten out of thirteen countries. The second highest overall ranked general competency is a knowledge of online resources, followed by customer service, and then foreign language. These rankings remain largely the same when participants are asked to look ahead five to ten years, with search skills and familiarity with online sources remaining first and second. However, foreign language is ranked third most important for the next five to ten years, with customer service falling to fourth place. Wilcoxon's test revealed a value of $p=.970$, suggesting there is no significant difference in ranking between current and future skills. There was similar overlap and consensus in terms of the bottom-ranked competencies overall. A second Master's degree (or a second Bachelor's degree for those countries requiring only a Bachelor's to practice) was the overall least often selected competency, followed by budgeting.

While skill rankings for these competencies appear to be fairly consistent, further testing suggests that the overall consensus on general competencies across different countries is not strong. Friedman's test and Kendall's ranked correlation coefficient test was applied to determine if there was a difference in median ranks, or if countries rank the same skills at the same levels. Friedman's test resulted in a value of $F = 133.48$, $DF= 18$ and $p<0.001$, meaning the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis that at least one median score is different from the others must be accepted. Kendall's coefficient looks for agreement among scores. The test gives a value between 0 and 1, with values closer to 1 indicating a stronger agreement. For general competencies, the Kendall's coefficient is 0.57, a relatively weak score suggesting

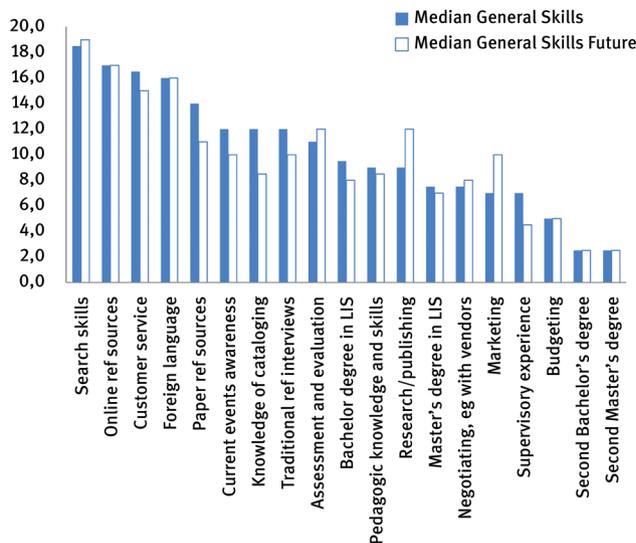


Figure 3: Current and Future Rank of General Skills

that there is variance in how the different countries rank or value the same skills. Indeed, this variance is born out even with one of the top-ranking skills. While currently knowledge of a foreign language is ranked the fourth most important overall and third most important looking ahead over the next decade, it falls within the bottom two for the three English-speaking countries of the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. According to the Kendall's coefficient, knowledge of a foreign language is the skill most likely to receive different rankings, followed by a Bachelor degree in LIS (a skill which does not apply to all countries), and then the traditional reference interview. Figure 3 shows the comparative current and future median rankings of all nineteen general competencies.

Technical

There is a clear leader among the technical skills: online searching. In fact, online searching was ranked number one by all thirteen countries, making this decidedly the most highly valued technical skill. Knowledge of and facility with social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, was the second ranked technical skill. Programming was the bottom-ranked skill. Even greater consistency is evident among the rankings of technical skills than among general skills. In this case, Friedman's test resulted in $F=56.57$, degrees of freedom=7, and $p<.001$, meaning the median rankings of technical skills across countries can be assumed to be the same. However, the Kendall's coefficient value (0.62) is too low to support the idea that there is consistency among the countries on rankings of

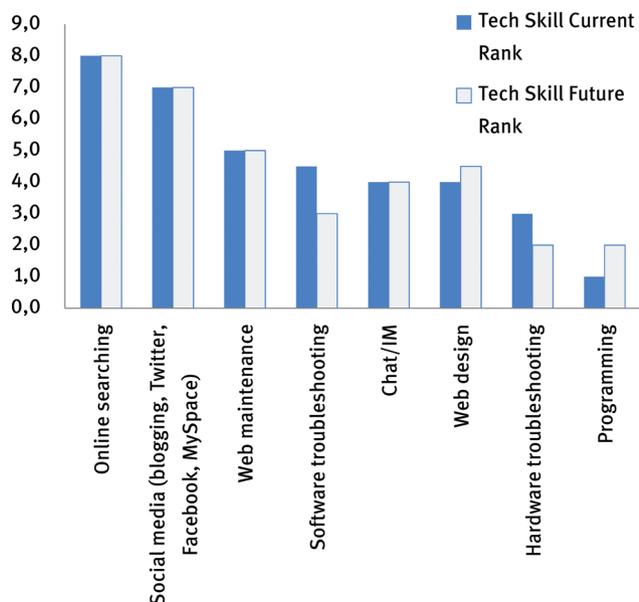


Figure 4: Current and Future Rank of Technical Skills

technical skills. Indeed, while agreement about the relative importance of online searching skills, social media, and programming is consistent, there is much more variance across the other skills. In particular, chat, hardware troubleshooting, and software troubleshooting are ranked very differently by different countries, appearing among the top three in some cases, and the bottom three in others. Figure 4 illustrates the overall ranking of technical skills. As was the case with general skills, a Wilcoxon test ($p=.987$) suggests that there is no difference in current and future rankings of technical skills.

Personal

Verbal communication is unanimously ranked first, by all thirteen countries, followed by listening, and then approachability. This unanimity of opinion across cultures would indicate a strong belief across the profession in the need for these skills. Conversely, conflict management and stress management were consistently ranked as the bottom two. As with both general and technical skills, the Wilcoxon test showed no difference in the ranking of skills currently compared with five to ten years in the future ($p=.982$). While the rankings of the top and bottom personal skills were consistent across countries, both for now and for the near future, less consistency exists for middle ranked skills. Indeed, Friedman's test ($F= 98.26$, $DF = 13$, $P < 0.001$) indicates that the median ranks were

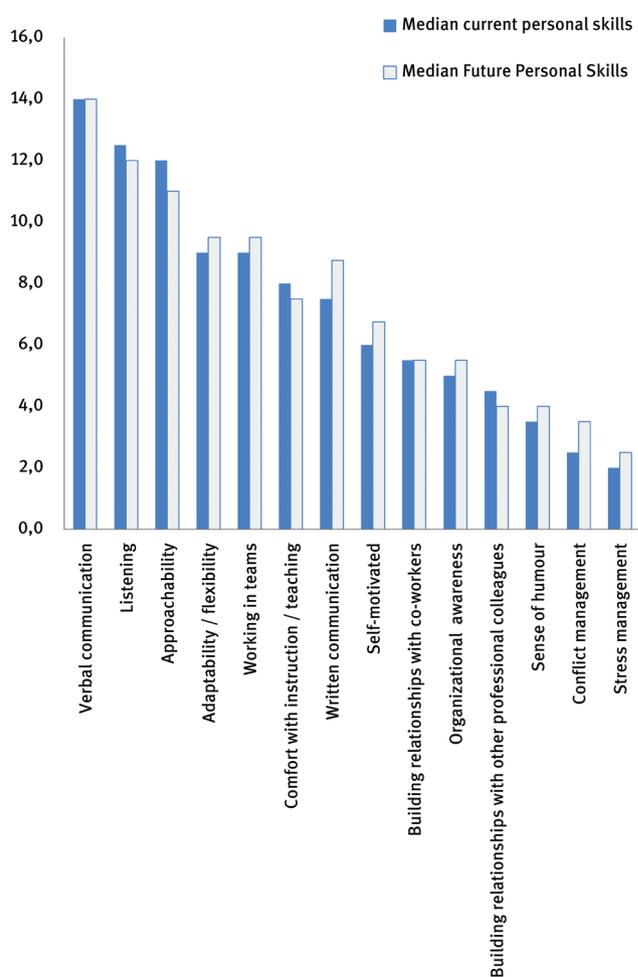


Figure 5: Current and Future Rank of Personal Skills

not all the same across countries, or to put it another way, there were some differences in how the median skills are ranked. Likewise, Kendall's coefficient ($K=.058$) shows that the rankings were not well correlated for personal competencies apart from the top and bottom ranked. In particular, organizational awareness, sense of humor, self-motivation, and conflict management were ranked very differently in different countries. Figure 5 gives the comparative current and future rank for personal skills.

Demographic Factors

While differences across countries might account for most of the variance in responses, it is also interesting to consider the demographics of the respondents. The gender of respondents was so heavily skewed towards female across all countries, it precluded any meaningful analysis. Age

was more evenly distributed, and analysis suggests that the age of the respondent might correlate with selecting certain competencies as important. These results are particularly interesting because the age range of respondents was skewed by country, with some countries having much older respondents than others. As a result, it is possible that the differences in selection of competencies by country are not just a factor of culture, but might also be influenced by respondent age.

As noted above, knowledge of a foreign language and the traditional reference interview are two general competencies that showed significant variance across countries, according to Kendall's coefficient. However, chi-square testing of those same competencies reveals some variance by age group as well. For example, 77.8% of respondents under the age of 25 chose foreign language as an important skill, compared to 54.4% of respondents between the ages of 31–40, and just 23.5% of respondents between the ages of 51–0. A chi-square test of these numbers results in $p=.0031$, suggesting that age is a factor in whether a respondent believes knowledge of a foreign language to be important. Similarly, a chi-square test of age and selection of knowledge of the traditional reference interview as an important competency results in $p<.0001$, suggesting an even stronger connection for these two variables. Among general competencies, customer service also showed some correlation with age ($p=.0006$).

Because use of technology is often associated with younger generations, while older people are assumed to be less comfortable with technology, one might expect to find correlations between age and some of the more technical competencies. Indeed, there does appear to be some relationship between age and belief that knowledge of online reference sources is an important competency ($p<.0001$), with younger respondents choosing this competency at proportionally higher rates than older respondents. In other cases, however, no correlation appears to exist. For instance, a chi-square test of age and familiarity with social media results in $p=.59$, and the same test of age and familiarity with chat or instant messaging shows $p=.55$. In each case, age does not seem to be a factor in whether respondents believe these skills to be important. Perhaps most interestingly, age does not correlate with selection of knowledge of print resources as an important competency ($p=.9$). Thus, while it may be that younger librarians are more likely to believe online sources are important, they are not devaluing knowledge of print resources. In other words, younger librarians appear to be just as likely as older librarians to believe that knowledge of print resources remains important.

Discussion

The results reveal considerable consensus across the participating countries as to the most and least important competencies for reference librarians both now and over the next decade. In terms of top and bottom rated skills overall, countries are practically unanimous in their agreement on the importance of certain skills such as searching and verbal communication, and the relatively low importance of computer programming or second Master's degrees. In general, skills related to finding and communicating answers seem to be among the most highly ranked. For instance, three of the most highly rated skills in the general and technical categories are searching in general, online searching specifically, and familiarity with online resources. Along the same lines, familiarity with print/paper reference sources was the fifth highest rated skill out of nineteen general skills, and the Friedman's test suggested that this rank was fairly consistent across countries. Among the personal skills, verbal communication, listening, and approachability are all highly ranked. Each of these skills underpin the question-answering service of reference, and the findings support the idea that reference librarians across different countries are expected to have expertise with sources to locate information efficiently and effectively, as well as the interpersonal skills to interact effectively with patrons. This would suggest the generalizability of competencies for the reference profession regardless of culture, supporting the idea that these skills be integrated into library science education across geographic borders to ensure graduates are properly prepared for employment wherever they go to work.

While top and bottom ranked skills usually were consistently ranked across countries, less consensus exists for middle ranked skills. Further, the overall levels of consistency varied across the three categories of general, technical, and personal skills. These discrepancies are suggestive of the way reference services might differ across countries. Technology skills are ranked most consistently across different countries, meaning different countries seem to rank the same skills at the same levels. This suggests a consistency in the tools used in reference work around the world, and uniformity in the skills necessary to effectively provide answers. Again, this set of skills would therefore be of particular importance in reference education. The personal skills showed the most variation in the middle ranked skills among different countries, with organizational awareness, self-motivation, sense of humor, and conflict management all likely to receive different rankings from different countries. Of the general

competencies, knowledge of a foreign language, Bachelor's degree in LIS, and the traditional reference interview showed the greatest variation in ranking according to the Kendall's test. Variance for the Bachelor's degree in LIS can most likely be explained by the differing educational requirements of different countries. For some of the participating countries, a Bachelor's degree is sufficient for practice, while other countries require a Master's degree. The difference in emphasis on foreign language and traditional reference interview is harder to explain.

Foreign language is the general skill most likely to receive different rankings in different countries. Indeed, six out of thirteen countries ranked knowledge of a foreign language among the top three most important skills. Conversely, all three English-speaking countries ranked knowledge of a foreign language in the bottom two. Possibly, these differences reflect the emphasis on English as the default language of many database and indexing services. In other words, non-English speaking countries may find knowledge of English to be important in order to effectively and efficiently search some of the major research databases while English-speaking countries already possess this skill. However, the survey did not ask participants to specify which languages they find to be important, and even within the non-English speaking countries, emphasis on knowledge of a foreign language varied. Further, it is interesting to note that all three English-speaking countries ranked customer service as one of the top three skills and yet, even with increasingly diverse patron bases, including increasing numbers of international students, and a heavy emphasis on customer service, the English-speaking countries do not indicate knowledge of a foreign language to be very important. This also could partly be due to the fact that many foreign students in the English-speaking countries also come to learn English very well, and do not expect or demand to be helped in any language other than English in the library.

Similarly, it is unclear why the ranking for the traditional reference interview varies so much. Several of the most highly ranked personal skills, including verbal communication, listening, and approachability, are closely linked to performing a good reference interview. Nevertheless, the traditional reference interview was not ranked among the top skills overall, and its ranking differed widely from one country to another. It is possible that the terminology confused participants. Perhaps some participants defined "traditional reference interview" as that occurring only at a physical reference desk, and as institutions adopt different models of service, such as remote reference they view the traditional interview as less important. Further research could probe these areas and ex-

plore why emphasis varies so much for foreign language and the reference interview.

Conclusions

The types of skills for which there is consensus suggest that while the basic work of reference might be the same across different countries, the implementation and expression of the service might vary by culture. That is to say, the skills for which there is more consensus seem to be largely "hard" skills, or those related to content knowledge and expertise, while interpersonal skills or skills focusing on relationships with patrons and colleagues are more likely to vary in ranking across countries. For instance, technical skills were likely to be ranked similarly across countries, as were certain general skills such as searching, and knowledge of online and print reference sources. In contrast, the softer and less easily defined interpersonal skills including sense of humor, conflict management, and self-motivation show the greatest variation.

These findings suggest that, while core academic reference services are similar from one country to another, cultural differences are influencing expectations of the interpersonal interactions involved in providing those services. While academic reference librarians in all countries are expected to be able to use information sources effectively to locate and communicate answers to patrons, there are differences in the ways in which those librarians engage with the patron and with each other. As with foreign language and the traditional reference interview, further research could explore these cultural differences in more depth. Differences in emphasis on sense of humor, for instance, suggest that in some cultures making jokes or other casual social interactions are acceptable, while in other cultures that may be considered unimportant or even frowned upon. Similarly, varying emphasis on self-motivation might imply that in some countries academic reference librarians are expected or encouraged to take initiative and to set their own goals and priorities, while in other countries they might be expected to be more responsive to directions or guidance from supervisors.

The consensus around hard skills, and variation in soft skills, suggests that culture might play a large role in how reference services are delivered across different countries. In other words, while the skills of searching, using resources, and understanding technology are fairly consistent, the expectations around how reference librarians communicate with patrons and other professionals seems to vary more, suggesting that cultural norms governing

interpersonal interactions play a role in reference work. However, his study did not explicitly inquire into the reasoning behind the differences in soft reference skills, and thus the data cannot explain why these differences exist; but this would be a useful area to explore in greater detail in a future study.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that there are many similarities in the expected competencies for academic reference services across countries. This indicates reference librarians might be able to transfer many of their skills from one setting to another. This could have implications for exchange programs such as Fulbright and Erasmus Scholarships, as well as for librarians interested in relocating on a more permanent basis. Further, it suggests that library science curricula could have similar focal points for reference courses, allowing some flexibility for transfer of credits, study abroad programs, or relocating after graduation. Nevertheless, important differences exist as well. One of the most obvious differences is the variation in minimum qualifications to practice, with some countries not even requiring a Bachelor's degree, while others require a Master's in Library Science or equivalent. Further, reference librarians, like anyone traveling across different countries, need to be aware of cultural differences in norms and expectations for interpersonal interactions, and to be sensitive to possible differences in how patrons and colleagues interact, and the expected relationships between employees and supervisors. On the whole, however, the findings of this study support the idea that core reference services span national boundaries, and that academic reference librarians share many of the same values and expectations for provision of services.

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Appendix

Library Reference Survey

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Reference Librarians

For this survey we are going to ask you for some information on your daily work as a reference librarian, and to share some of your thoughts about reference skills and abilities of the future.

It should take you approximately 15 to 20 minutes to finish the entire survey.

You can stop the survey at any time without penalty.

All librarians who finish the survey can enter a random drawing for a \$25 Amazon.com gift card as a thank you for participating. (Your information will be collected at the end of the survey.)

If you have any questions as you are going through this survey, please contact Laura Saunders at laura.saunders@simmons.edu.

[Thank you for your assistance!](#)

No personally identifiable information about you will be collected, but I would like to know some details about the participants in this study to help in the analysis and recommendations.

1. Your gender

Female

Male

2. Your age range:

under 25 years

25 - 30 years

31 - 40 years

41 - 50 years

51 - 60 years

61 - 70 years

71 and over

3. Do you have an MLIS degree? (or any Master's degree offered by an ALA accredited library school)

Yes

No

4. Do you work in this library full time or part time?

Full time

Part time

5. How long have you been a librarian?

less than one year

1 - 3 years

4 - 7 years

8 - 15 years

15 - 20 years

21 - 25 years

26 - 30 years

more than 30 years

6. How long have you worked in this library?

less than one year

1 - 3 years

4 - 7 years

8 - 15 years

- 15 - 20 years
- 21 - 25 years
- 26 - 30 years
- more than 30 years

7. What is your library's Carnegie Classification (academic libraries only)?

- Associate's College
- Baccalaureate College
- Master's Larger
- Master's Medium
- Master's Smaller
- Doctorate-granting University
- Research/Very High
- Special Focus Institution

On this page you will be asked to share your ideas on the knowledge and skills you use at work.

1. What are all the things you do in a typical week? You have as much space as you need to type in your answers. One idea per line please!

we have a text box here, which we can adjust to be as big or small as you want]

2. Of these things, what are the three to five most frequent things you do?
[we have a text box here, which we can adjust to be as big or small as you want]

On the list below, check the skills you believe are most important for today's Reference librarian

1. Click next to each General Skill you believe is important for today's Reference librarian

- second Master's degree
- budgeting
- foreign language
- marketing
- supervisory experience
- research/publishing
- knowledge of cataloging
- assessment and evaluation
- customer service
- familiarity with paper reference sources
- familiarity with online reference sources
- search skills
- negotiating
- current events awareness
- traditional reference interview

2. Which of these do you think are the two or three most important?

[we have a text box here, which we can adjust to be as big or small as you want]

3. Click next to each Technology Skill you believe is important for today's Reference librarian

- online searching
- programming
- web design
- web maintenance
- social media (blogging, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace)
- hardware troubleshooting
- software troubleshooting
- chat/IM

4. Which of these do you think are the two or three most important?

[we have a text box here, which we can adjust to be as big or small as you want]

5. Click next to each Personal Skill you believe is important for today's Reference librarian

- verbal communication
- written communication
- listening
- working in teams
- approachability
- comfort with instruction/teaching
- self-motivated
- stress management
- building relationships with co-workers
- building relationships with other professional colleagues
- conflict management
- adaptability/flexibility
- sense of humor
- organizational awareness

6. Which of these do you think are the two or three most important?

[we have a text box here, which we can adjust to be as big or small as you want]

We want to know how to improve the education new Reference librarians are receiving.

Which of these items do you believe will be most important for Reference librarians to develop to meet professional demands over the next decade?

1. General Skill

second Master's degree

budgeting

foreign language

marketing

supervisory experience

research/publishing

knowledge of cataloging

assessment and evaluation

customer service

familiarity with paper reference sources

familiarity with online reference sources

search skills

negotiating

current events awareness

traditional reference interview

2. Which of these do you think are the two or three most important?

[text box]

3. Technology Skill

online searching

programming

web design

web maintenance

social media (blogging, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace)

hardware troubleshooting

software troubleshooting

chat/IM

4. Which of these do you think are the two or three most important?

[text box]

5. Personal Skill

verbal communication

written communication

listening

working in teams

approachability

comfort with instruction/teaching

self-motivated

stress management

building relationships with co-workers

building relationships with other professional

colleagues

conflict management

adaptability/flexibility

sense of humor

organizational awareness

6. Which of these do you think are the two or three most important?

[text box]

1. What skills and knowledge requirements have changed for Reference librarians over the last five to ten years?

That is, what do you do differently now than in the past? (things you do, or things you have stopped doing)

If you have been a librarian for a shorter period of time, list any changes you have seen during your time at work.

[text box]

2. What skills or knowledge have you noticed lacking in your new hires?

[text box]

Thank you so much for your help with this study!

1. If there is anything else you would like to add about Reference librarian work, please

do so here.

[text box]

2. For the purposes of tracking response rates, please enter the name of your institution. This information will not be shared or reported in any way, and will not be attached to your answers. Thank you.

[text box]

3. If you would like to be entered into a random drawing for a \$25 Amazon.com gift card, please leave your name and email address here. Your personal information will not be reported anywhere, and will not be attached to your answers.

[text box]