

DIGITAL REFERENCE SERVICES OF UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN JAPAN ¹

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ABSTRACT

At present, digital reference services (DRS) are considered important services of library. DRS were already become widespread in the world, and many interesting researches into DRS were made. The other sides, full-scale surveys about DRS that have not been take effect in Japan. Accordingly I researched what kind of DRS were supplying and thought librarians about DRS in Japanese university libraries.

This paper reports the summary of the survey of reference librarians in university libraries of Japan, asking them about their experiences with and attitudes towards the use of digital and network technologies and resources in reference work. 1,013 asking papers were sent to librarians of 301 universities then 412 papers returned (response rate is 40.7%). 66.7% of respondents reported that their library was currently offering a digital reference service.

The result of the research was that e-mail and web form were most popular digital technologies what used for DRS as ways of receiving and answering reference questions. As resources, OPAC and network resources were used very often for reference tool. This survey shows DRS in Japanese university libraries, as this is nothing but basic research, more research is needed to discuss DRS in Japan.

INTRODUCTION

DRS are important services as not only human mediate services in library but also a function of digital library. It seems that DRS is the service which raise library's value, therefore DRS has strong points that is free from limitation of place and time in comparison with traditional reference service.

Definitions of DRS are truly variable. According to definition of Lankes ⁽¹⁾, "digital reference refers to the provision of human-intermediated service to users over a digital network." Lankes ⁽¹⁾ also state that "(digital reference) development has been in large part parallel to digital library research and development." From this viewpoint one may say that DRS deeply concern with digital library. In this paper, DRS are defined as reference services make use of variable digital technologies.

In recent years, large scale DRS are appeared. For examples, Educator's Reference Desk, Internet Public Library, Virtual Reference Desk, QuestionPoint, 24/7 Reference. All of the above DRS have most digitally processes of reference work and deeply concern with other function of digital library. Also in Japan, necessary of DRS were recognized and National Diet Library produced "Collaborative Reference Database Project"⁽²⁾ at 2003.

According to Janes's research ⁽³⁾, 83% American academic librarians offering DRS. On the other hand, not studies have ever tried to DRS that were supplying in Japanese university libraries. However, it is important that to grasp of the state of affairs for considering library services in future. The purpose of this study is to investigate how many libraries of university in Japan supply what kind of DRS, and to clear librarian's view to DRS.

METHODS

Questionnaires

I made questionnaires based on some previous researches. Especially Janes's research ⁽³⁾ and preparation search ² were referred.

The questionnaire consists of following three main parts and entire questions were 22.

Part A: DRS as ways of receiving and answering reference questions. (12 questions)

Part B: DRS as information and reference resources. (3 questions)

Part C: Profile of librarians. (7 questions)

The samples

Subjects of this investigation were librarians of all national universities and public and private universities that have 5 or more departments.³ This is because of large cost were needed for survey all librarians. Additionally, according to my previous research, larger university libraries more provide DRS. National universities, however, intended to change establishment in 2004, therefore, I researched all national university libraries.

The survey

I gain number of librarians of each library from "Statistics on libraries in Japan"⁽⁴⁾. I sent questionnaire to the head of library in 301 libraries on July 30, 2003. 1,013 questionnaires and envelopes were enclosed.

RESULTS

I sent 1,013 questionnaires and received 412 responses. Response rates were 40.7%. Questionnaires of this study were 22 questions. This paper includes result of them thought important results.

Part A: DRS as ways of receiving and answering reference questions.

66.7% of librarians answered that they supplying DRS at that time. We see from Table 1 that digital technologies were e-mail and web form that most of used for DRS. This result is similar to Janes's it⁽³⁾.

Table 1 Type of tools to use reference works (n=275)

Tools	Answers	%
E-mail	247	68.6
Web form	81	22.5
Chat	3	0.8
Video conference, TV telephone	4	1.1
Bulletin Board System (BBS)	23	6.4
Others	2	0.6

A glance at Fig.2 will reveal that DRS take up 24.9% of entire reference questions and more than half librarians said that they have supplying DRS before 2001. It indicates diffusion of DRS were not small in Japanese university libraries.

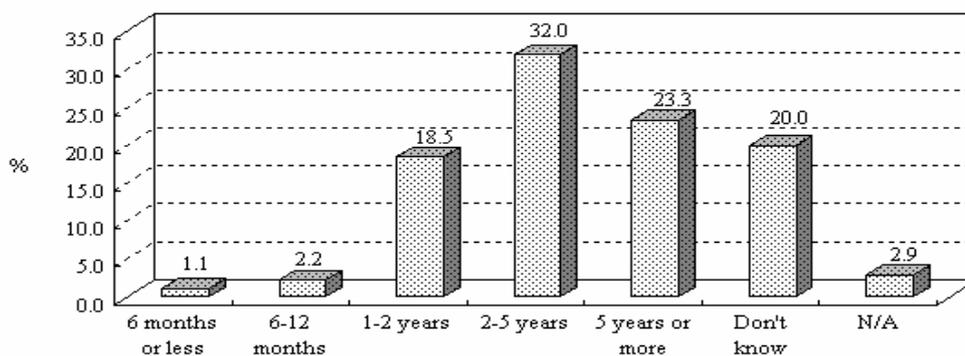


Fig.2 Time passage from libraries have become provide DRS (n=275)

In Fig.1, “don't know” responses and “N/A” were omitted. The ratio of DRS in whole reference works, average was 24.9%, median was category of “10-19%”, mode was category of “0-9%”.

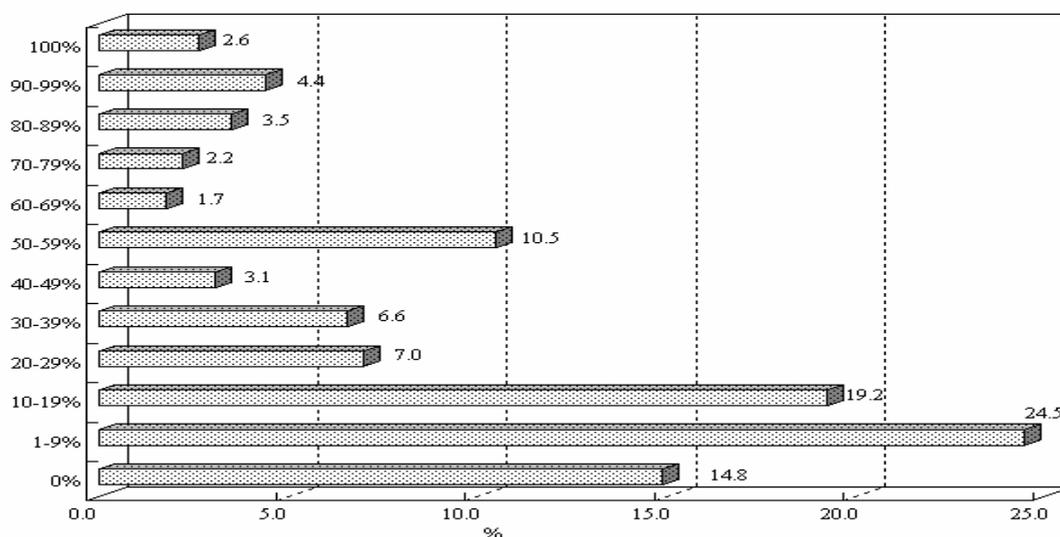


Fig.1 The ratio of DRS in whole reference works (n=229)

Answers of 81.8% stated that reference works were changed by use the digital technologies for reference services. Those of 79.9% said DRS make more convenience for patrons.

If we look at Table 2 we will see that many librarians think that reference works were not getting worth by use to digital technologies. There is a significant difference between “Ready-reference questions” and “Research questions” of answered “Agree” to the question “Do you think that digital technologies were getting better to reference works?” ($\chi^2=23.100$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$). In the same way, answered “Disagree” has a significant difference from each kind of questions ($\chi^2=23.210$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$). Accordingly, librarians thought that research questions are well served by DRS than ready-reference questions. This result was contrary to Janes's research⁽³⁾.

Table 2 Would DRS were getting better to reference works (n=275)

Kind of questions	Agree	Disagree	No change	Don't know	N/A
Ready-reference questions	50.9%	12.4%	26.9%	7.6%	2.2%
Research questions	70.9%	1.8%	20.0%	6.2%	1.1%

Part B: DRS as information and reference resources.

96.5% of librarians answered that they libraries supplying digitally resources for library users at that time.

I got librarians to choose resources to three that used to DRS that appeared in Table 3. OPAC and network digital resources were mostly frequency resources for reference works, “don't know” responses and “N/A” omitted.

Table 3 Resources of used for reference works (n=412)

Resources	Answers	%
OPAC (contained other libraries)	492	45.0
Digital resources: network	359	32.8
Paper resources	88	8.0
Human resources	76	6.9
Digital resources: package	74	6.8
Others	5	0.5

Part C: Profile of librarians.

Reference librarians who entirely responsible reference works are nothing but 22.3%. 74.8% librarians, then, hold the other works. Remaining 2.9% were N/A.

They were working for library as librarian, average 12 years and 11 months. In this period, they worked 1 year and 0.1 month as simply reference librarians, 4 years and 2.7 months as reference librarians who hold the additional works. Answers were 397, N/A were 15 (n=412).

Those things have reflected a present state of Japanese university libraries there are few subject librarians and reference librarians.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper that based on questionnaire research reported present DRS of Japanese university libraries. Purpose of research was to clear the actual conditions of the DRS in Japanese university libraries and librarian's opinion for DRS. According to the result of questionnaire research, many librarians supplying DRS and mostly librarians showed positive response.

Viewed in this light, it can be regarded as DRS of Japanese university libraries at an early stage of development. DRS and digital library are closely related, and it follows from this that evolvement of digital library are needed for development of DRS.

This research reported on the ground that so to speak only quantity of DRS. Research of quality of DRS is also needed in future. Because of the subjects of this survey were part of Japanese university, investigation of DRS on entire university are needed to discuss DRS in Japan.

¹ This paper is general remarks of following work has already been presented.
Yasui, Y. Digital reference services of university libraries in Japan: Results and analysis of questionnaire research. Journal of college and university libraries. no.72, 2004.

² Read a paper as “Digital reference services of university libraries in Japan” at Japan Society of Library and Information Science, Osaka, May 7, 2003.

³ “Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)” provide Japanese standard classification of size of university. By the classification, universities are classified by number of departments ⁽⁵⁾.

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