

The present status of public libraries in the state of Kuwait: librarians' perspectives

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Abstract

This study aims to explore librarians' perspectives regarding the present status of public libraries and their activities to serve the community in Kuwait. To achieve the objectives of the study, the descriptive analytical method was used. A random sample

of 262 librarians was chosen to answer 42 questions in a questionnaire that was divided into five dimensions: the role of public libraries (9 questions), the availability of information services (6 questions), using information technology (6 questions), library environment (7 questions), the administration and financial level (6 questions) and awareness of whole library activities (8 questions). The data were analysed using SPSS Statistics to calculate the estimate of the librarians' responses and the significant statistical differences in their responses using General linear model. The study found a low level for all axes of the study, with statistically significant differences in the librarians' estimates due to the variable gender, age, educational qualification and number of years of experience. The study recommended the need to support libraries for users, especially with regard to providing advanced materials to meet a wide range of print and digital needs and providing the appropriate environment with a focus on awareness of library activities. The value of this study lies in exploring and understanding the perspectives of librarians, which is indispensable for improving services and resources offered by public libraries.

Keywords

public library; librarians' perspectives; library status, Kuwait

Introduction

Public libraries are free to their users, and the only type of repository of books, periodicals and other media that serve all types of people. In the past, the library was a place to find a rare book or a place to read; now, libraries must adopt a new role as a place where the community finds new ideas, inspiration and others on similar journeys. Improving such applications and services can strengthen the community (Ayre, 2016; Godin, 2016; Ayre & Craner, 2017). Hallberg and Sipos-Zackrisson (2016) believe that external activities are very important for the library; for example, maintaining contact with non-users through online services and connecting with the community. In 2001, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) stated that the main aim of a public library is to provide services and resources in a wide variety of media to meet the needs of the public. However, the role of the public library is not only providing access to resources but also supporting people in using those resources by developing opportunities to do so and offering practical support and guidance. It is a place that promotes the process of learning and gaining knowledge in response to local needs and issues (Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England, 2016–2021). For

example, Public libraries are highly interested in improving access to curriculum literature for universities and colleges (Undhjem and Tveikra, 2016).

Nevertheless, in recent years, librarians have seen a decrease in the use of library facilities due to potential users' dependence on personal technology for obtaining information and resources. In Kuwait, for instance, there is an ongoing debate about the importance of public libraries and their role in the community amid the rapid development of communication and information technology. Newspaper articles on the topic note the low numbers of users and visitors, and questions such as 'Are public libraries still fulfilling their role effectively?' and 'Do we really need them?' are common.

In fact, questions regarding the need for public libraries are not new. In 2016, McLeay (2016) identified a similar situation, mentioning a 'common and long-held idea that public libraries will soon become irrelevant in the digital age' (p. 21). In fact, due to the decrease in interest from users, a real crisis is facing public libraries. Financial support is also decreasing, creating uncertainty around the long-term survival of these libraries. For this (Salarelli, 2014 and Al and Akilli, 2016) stated that public libraries must change their structure to survive. Therefore, the researchers of this study aim to explore librarians' perspectives on the current status of public libraries in the State of Kuwait.

Public libraries in Kuwait

The first public library in Kuwait was established after suggestions from and meetings of educated citizens who believed in the need for a library as a cultural centre for educated people to meet for reading and research. Also, having an appreciation the larger cultural role of the public library and its significance in supporting education, they collected donations for the library with that purpose in mind (Al-Hatem, 1980; Al-Tammar & Badawi, 1994; Al-Humood, 2007). The exact date of establishment of the first public library in Kuwait was debated by researchers and historians. Some claimed it was 1922 (Al-Hatem, 1980; Al-Nori, 1988; Abdel-Motey, 2001), while others say 1924 (Al-Tammar & Badawi, 1994; Al-Ali, 2006; Al-Humood, 2007). However, all are in agreement that the date was in the year 1341 in the Hijri calendar, which equals 1922 in the Gregorian calendar (based on Ihijri.com). Therefore, it can be said that the first public library in Kuwait City was established in 1922.

The library was initially Al-Ahliyah Library (the 'national library' or the 'people's library'), and its aim was to serve as a public forum during the cultural development movement in the early twentieth century. In 1936, the library was placed under the supervision of the government through the Department of

Knowledge (later, the Ministry of Education), and with the increasing number of visitors, a branch library was opened in the cashiers' market in 1953. In view of the importance of public libraries, the government was encouraged to open a new library outside the city in the Al-Ahmadi area in 1960 (Al-Ali, 2006; Al-Humood, 2007). Thereafter, further libraries were established until they reached the current number of 51 public libraries throughout the country as listed in table (1) (Al-Otaibi, 2016).

Table 1: Public libraries in Kuwait (Al-Otaibi, 2016).

Area	Number of libraries
Al-Asima(Capital)	16
Hawally	9
Al-Farwaniya	8
Mubarak Al-Kabeer	4
Al-Ahmadi	10
Al-Jahra	4
Total	51

Literature Review

The importance of existing public libraries in the Internet or digital age has been debated not only in Kuwait, but also globally, as mentioned by McLeay (2016). Nevertheless, Kinney (2010) indicates that libraries remain important and play an effective role regarding Internet provision; specifically, librarians in public libraries can act as guides to the Internet, and they offer services that the Internet cannot. In addition, McClure and Jaeger (2009) stated that librarians are Internet access providers, teachers and trainers and provide information services such as financial information, health care information, and job seeking and so on.

According to Faulkner (2018), public libraries often support entrepreneurs in their communities. A majority of libraries provide print and digital resources to these users, including databases, online research guides and online courses. In addition, public libraries have a huge value to society, often defined in terms of reading materials and the services the library provides to the individual and the whole society (Faulkner, 2018). Brewster (2014) explained that 'the empowerment associated with being able to make non-commercial, unpressured decisions about what to read all contributed to the opportunity to conduct an act of self-care by withdrawing from stressful situations into the public library space' (p. 99). Similarly, Sufar, Talib and Hambali (2012) considered space planning, selection of furniture, lighting, materials and finishes conducive to creating an attractive

physical interior environment. Such considerations help public libraries to gain a positive reputation that can contribute to their survival.

Bertot and Jaeger (2008) examined the ways in which the Internet access delivered by public libraries affects their communities. Othman (2015) investigated the role of the public library in reducing the digital divide and indicated the existence of a digital divide, but also suggested that the availability of computers and Internet have assisted the community to overcome the substantial information divide and develop its culture. Bo Kinney (2010) addressed the issue of why the Internet matters for public libraries. The analysis finds no disparity in the number of public computers available in areas with high and low incomes but finds a significant—and widening—disparity in the number of computers available in areas with a higher versus lower percentage of non-white and non-English-speaking households.

In Kuwait, Public libraries have received limited attention from scholars. Indeed, in the past 20 years, very few scholars have carried out research related to public libraries in Kuwait. Most of the studies that have been conducted discussed similar issues, such as librarians' capabilities and what they need to gain to improve their performance (Abdel-Motey, 2001; Al-Humood, 2007) and the availability and use of information technology (Al-Qallaf & Al-Azmi, 2002). They have also covered the status and reality of public libraries, difficulties and obstacles that libraries and librarians encounter and the decreasing number of visitors to public libraries, as well as providing recommendations to address these issues (Al-Asari et al., 1999; Abdel-Motey, 2001; Abdel-Motey & Al-Ansari, 2003; Alenezi, 2004; Al-Humood, 2007). However, there has been only one study on public libraries in Kuwait. That study was carried out by Ghuloum and Alyacoub's (2016) who investigated the role of public libraries in serving individuals with autism spectrum disorder and their families in particular. Therefore, this study will help fill the gap for a more general study by exploring librarians' perspectives and awareness regarding the present status of public libraries and their activities to serve the community in this new era, a topic never before investigated by academic studies.

The literature has covered various aspects of the issues faced by public libraries both locally and internationally, and the issues discussed in those studies were, to some extent, relevant to this study. However, none of the studies discussed these issues from librarians' perspectives which will be the main focus of this study.

Methodology

To achieve the objectives of the study, the descriptive analytical method was used to investigate the state of public libraries in Kuwait. A random sample of 262 librarians was chosen to answer 42 questions in a questionnaire that was divided into five dimensions: the role of public libraries (9 questions), the availability of information services (6 questions), using information technology (6 questions), library environment (7 questions), the administration and financial level (6 questions) and awareness of whole library activities (8 questions) as shown in Appendix (1). In addition the questionnaire included five demographic variables which are gender, age, qualification and experience. The participants answered based on the five-point Likert scale. The data was analysed using SPSS software for the mean standard deviation and the GLM Multivariate procedure which provides regression analysis and analysis of variance.. In addition the questionnaire included five demographic variables which are gender, age, qualification and experience. The participants answered based on the five-point Likert scale. The data was analysed using SPSS software for the mean standard deviation and the GLM Multivariate procedure which provides regression analysis and analysis of variance.

In fact, the questionnaire was reviewed by a number of examiners specialists in library and information sciences and modified according to their suggestions. The reliability was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, where data collected showed a high level of internal consistency as Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.89, where a coefficient of 0.7 or higher is considered acceptable by most social science researchers (DeVellis, 2012), which indicates that the results of the questionnaire can be generalised based on the sample.

Demographic characteristics

Table (2) shows the distribution of the participants according to demographic characteristics where males dominated the sample with 58.4% of the 262 of the librarians who participated in this study. In addition, Diploma or bachelor degree holders dominated the sample with 46.9% as well as the age between 30–40 with 48.5% and the experience of 5–10 years with 48.1%.

Table 2: Distribution of the study sample participants according to demographic variables.

Variable	category	Frequency	Percent	
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Gender	Male	153	58.4	
	Female	109	41.6	
qualification	Secondary and less	43	16.4	
	Diploma or bachelor degree	123	46.9	
	Higher studies	96	36.6	
Age	Less than 30 years	40	15.3	
	45 – 30 years	127	48.5	
	More than 45 years	95	36.3	
Experience	less than 5 years	91	34.7	
	5-10 years	126	48.1	
	More than 10 years	45	17.2	

Results

To explore the perspective of librarians, the researchers calculated the percentages, statistical means and standard deviations of the responses concerning the sixth different aspects concerning public libraries in Kuwait, as shown in table (3) and Fig (1).

Table (3): the perspective of librarians

Dimensions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Role of public libraries.	2.3247	.41892
Availability of information services	2.4663	.76828
Administration and financial level	2.5354	.81149
Library environment	2.5420	.76930
Awareness of whole library activities	2.5623	.47987
Using information technology	2.6496	.71628
Total Scale	2.5134	.38565

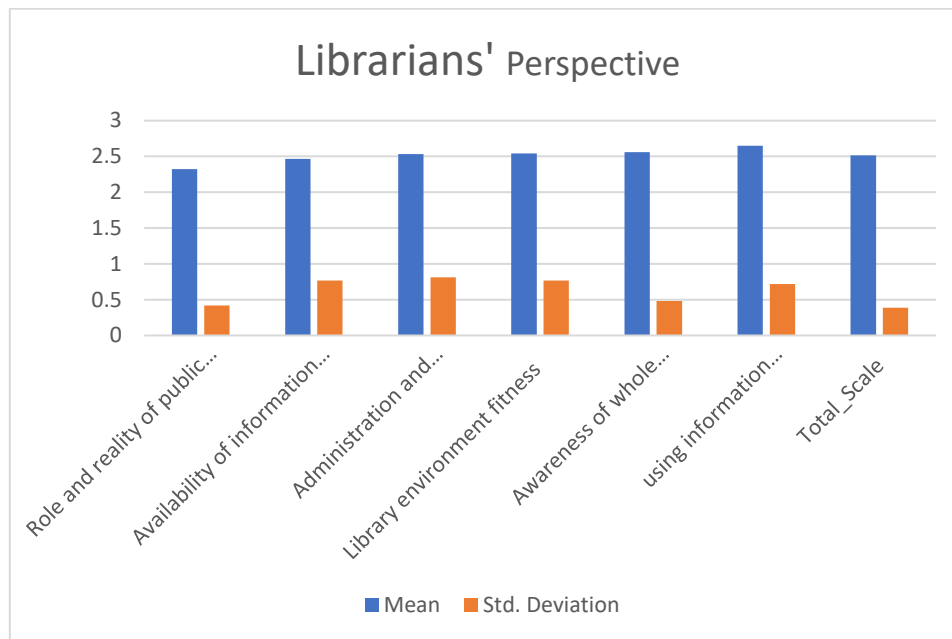


Fig (1): Librarians' Answers

Table (3) shows the perspective of librarians towards the present status of public libraries in Kuwait. The cultural role of the public libraries scored the lowest rate with a mean of 2.3 and .41892 standard deviation, where availability of information services scored a mean of 2.5 and .76828 Std. Deviation, while administration and financial level scored a mean of 2.5 and .81149 Std. Deviation. In addition, library environment scored a mean of 2.5 and .76930 where awareness of whole library activities scored a mean 2.6 and .47987 Std. Deviation while the usage of the public libraries scored the highest mean of 2.6496 with .71628 Std. Deviation

Significant Statistical differences

The GLM Multivariate procedure provides the analysis of variance for multiple dependent variables by one or more factor variables or covariates. General linear model procedure can test null hypotheses about the effects of factor variables on the means of various groupings of a joint distribution of dependent variables. However, for the effects of factor variables on the means of various groupings of a joint distribution of dependent variables, Tests of Between-Subjects Effects gave the following results that shows only dimensions with significant effects, shown in table(4).

Table (4). Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	The role of public library	3.768	1	3.768	37.110	.000	.127
Age	The role of public library	4.883	2	2.441	24.043	.000	.159
	Admin. and Financial	6.879	2	3.439	5.468	.005	.041
	Total Scale	1.377	2	.688	5.218	.006	.039
Qualifications	The role of public library	1.064	2	.532	5.241	.006	.040
Experience	The role of public library	.871	2	.436	4.289	.015	.033
	Library environment	5.166	2	2.583	4.610	.011	.035
	Services	4.808	2	2.404	4.181	.016	.032

It seems like that different categories of gender, age, qualification and Experience do differentiate the role of public library. In addition, it seems like different categories of experience do differentiate the library environment but not so much for gender, age and qualification. Moreover, it seems like that different categories of age do differentiate the administration and financial level of public library but not so much for gender, qualification and experience. More importantly, it seems like that the significant difference on the total scale is due to age but not so much for gender, qualification, different and Experience. Fig (2) shows clearly the estimated marginal means of the total scale at each level of gender, age, qualifications and experience

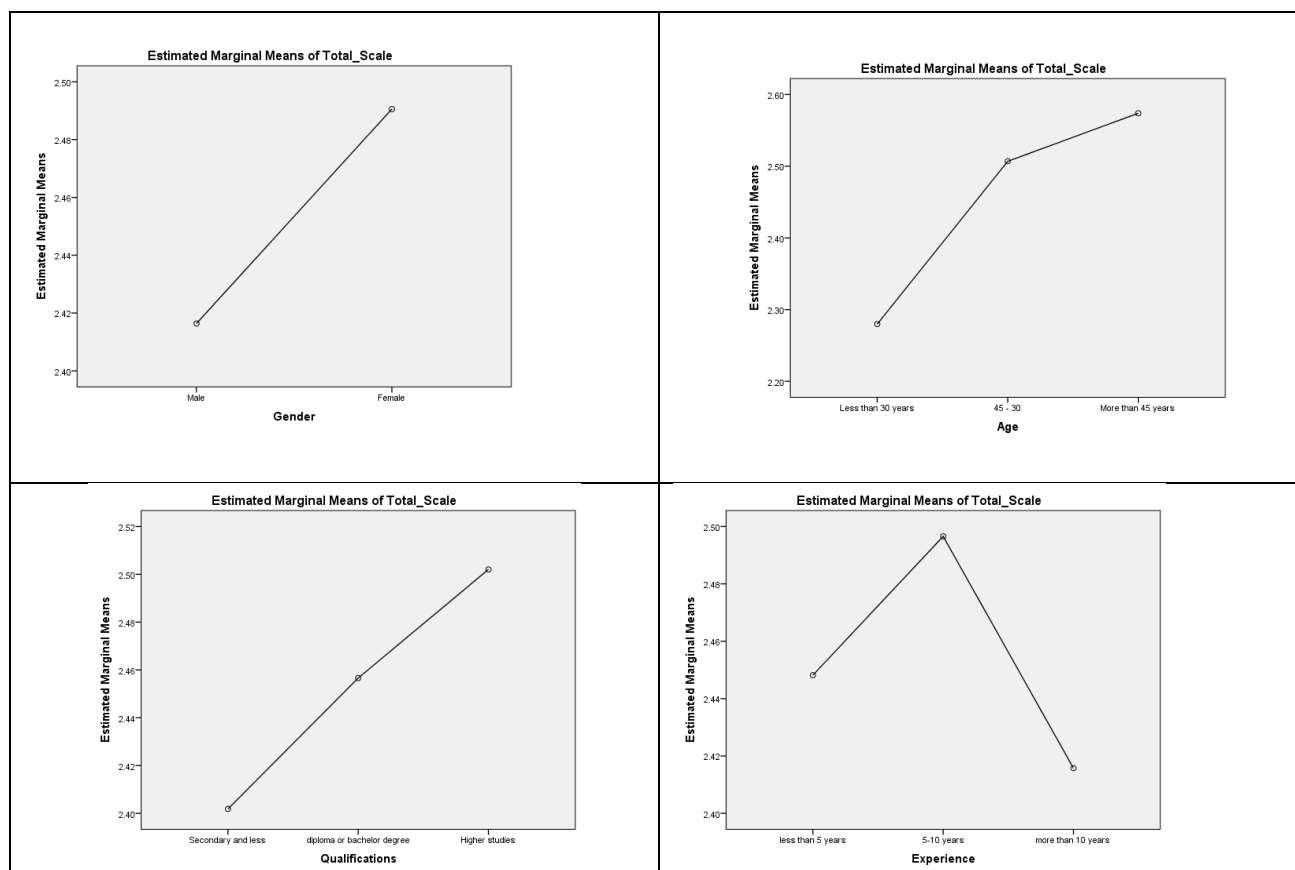


Fig (2) the estimated marginal means at each level of our independent variables

Discussion and conclusion

According to the findings of Table 3 concerning the Role of public libraries, most librarians disagreed on the positive role of public libraries towards society. So, at most, they thought that the internet is an effective alternate for libraries. This may be due to the fact that the information available on libraries is available for any users on the internet and accessible and can be easily obtained without public libraries which means that they are not essential for society especially with the rapid social and cultural changes in life. In deed. This is reflected on their opinion that libraries are not that useful and that they are not of no difference than book stores which means for them that Public libraries will not exist in the future. In fact, this is very clear, as according to librarians, public library offers less services and sources through social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and blogs where the level of information services available in public libraries is no good. This is in addition to the fact that there are enough copies of books in the public library for external borrowing and the lesser and updated electronic information provided for visitors

This is not in line with Kinney (2010), who indicates that libraries remain important and have an effective role regarding Internet provision, so librarians in public libraries can act as guides to the Internet, and they are more than the Internet, nor in line with McClure and Jaeger (2009) stated that librarians are Internet access providers, teachers and trainers and provide information services, such as financial information, health care information, job seeking and so on.

Therefore, libraries must provide external and internal improvements and activities for society as stated by Hallberg and Sipos-Zackrisson (2016), external activities are very important for the library, for example, maintaining contact with non-users through online services and connecting with the community. However, as stated by Salarelli (2014) and Al and Akilli (2016), public libraries must solve the reduction of financial support so they can survive, and this can be by the cooperation of local governments and the information management departments of universities and professional associations.

With regards to the environment of public libraries. From the librarians' point of view, the design of the public library building is not suitable enough for future technological developments as public library has no less enough hall designed for learning and group lessons when needed by visitors. In addition, for librarians, the library entrances, exits, elevators, car parks and furniture seem not to be suitable enough for providing information services for people with special needs. This included air-conditioning level and lighting level. These findings are in line with what Sufar, Talib and Hambali (2012) mentioned when they stated that a well-considered space planning, selection of furniture, lighting, material and finishes create an attractive physical interior environment.

In addition, using information technology in public libraries seems to be not suitable as most librarians opined that public computers and programs for visitors for the purpose of searching and printing provided by libraries are not enough. This is in addition to that public library has no professional social media account for staying in touch with visitors and the poor services offered by library website and the poor automatic management system as stated by librarians and the absences or poor Internet access services for visitors and the tools for people with special needs (deaf devices, projectors, magnification devices and audible devices). This finding supports the study by Ghuloum and Alyacoub (2016), which found that public libraries do not pay sufficient attention to people with special needs.

In terms of administration and financial level, most librarians stated that there are current or future (short- or long-term) plans to develop the public library where the annual budget for the public library is not suitable. However, according

to librarians, the upper management of the public library is not fully aware of the role of libraries as a cultural centre in society, which could be the reason from their point of view that the higher management of the public library does not provide a suitable and satisfactory work environment to its employees, nor encourages its employees by giving them bonuses and incentives when they offer various cultural activities to the society. In addition, this could be the reason why the administration of the public library does not meet the professional requirements of its employees

More importantly, most librarians stated that public libraries have not enough suitable signage to help visitors use the facilities easily and that visitors cannot contact the public library through social media, email and chats and that the website of the public library has no guide booklets or electronic guide services and advertisements brochures outside the library to announce its lectures, cultural seminars and meeting to attract visitors. Moreover, schools of the Ministry of Education do not encourage their students to use the public libraries. Further, they stated that public library do not offer activities for the public, including children. It plays a cultural role by showing patriotic and documentary films and hosting exhibitions. These finding aligns with the results of other studies, such as those conducted by Ayre (2016), Godin (2016) and Ayre and Craner (2017), which argued that libraries must adopt a new role as a place where the community finds new ideas, inspiration and others on similar journeys. Improving such applications and services can strengthen the community. Nevertheless, public libraries should recognise and understand the importance of identifying community needs, designing impact measures to demonstrate how libraries can help address those needs and the variety of ways that the evidence of such impacts can be used to effectively support public libraries

Recommendations

The study recommended that librarians' perspectives towards public libraries should be taken into consideration in order to improve public libraries and that the obstacles and difficulties encountering public libraries to help decision makers improve public libraries in the future. In addition, the country should support public libraries so that they can provide users with advanced materials for any print and digital needs. More importantly, the researchers recommended that public libraries need to provide facilities that help users with special needs..

Suggested Future Studies

- This research suggest further studies that focuses on the users of the public library as this study was limited to the perspectives of the librarians

- This research suggest further studies that focus why and how can libraries make a difference in our communities

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Appendices

Appendix (1): the questionnaire

We are kindly inviting your participation in this study, which will involve a questionnaire survey. The survey is completely confidential and is for scientific purposes only and will be kept confidential. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may stop taking part at any time you wish. The survey should take about 15-20 minutes to complete. There are no right or wrong answers. Candid responses based on your personal thoughts are greatly appreciated. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and assistance.

Part (1)

Gender	Male
	Female
qualification	Secondary and less
	Diploma or bachelor degree
	Higher studies
Age	Less than 30 years
	45 – 30 years
	More than 45 years
Experience	less than 5 years
	5-10 years
	More than 10 years

Part(2)

Indicate (X) for your level of agreement for each of the statements below according to the scale below;

(1= Strongly Disagree 2= Disagree 3=Uncertain 4= Agree 5= Strongly Agree)

The role of public libraries	5	4	3	2	1
Public libraries should exist even though information is available on the Internet.					
Rapid social and cultural changes in life have affected visits to public libraries.					
Public libraries are essential for society.					
Information can be easily obtained without public libraries.					
Visitors to public libraries are satisfied with the role of libraries towards society.					
The country pays a lot of money for public libraries even though they are not useful.					
Society believes that libraries plays an effective role in serving it.					
Society sees libraries as bookstores.					
Public libraries will not exist in the future, as information will be available on the Internet.					
Availability of information services					
The public library offers its services and sources through social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and blogs.					
The level of information services available in public libraries is good.					
There are enough copies of books in the public library for external borrowing.					
The public library provides suitable electronic information for visitors					
The sources of information in public libraries are recent and suitable for their visitors.					
The public library provides suitable electronic information for visitors (periodicals, references, books, databases, etc.).					
Using information technology in public libraries.					
The public library provides computers and programs for visitors for the purpose of searching and printing.					
The public library has a social media account for staying in touch with visitors.					

The public library has a website that visitors can access to identify it and its services.				
The public library provides an automatic management system (borrowing, indexing, etc.)				
The public library provides Internet services for visitors.				
The public library provides tools for people with special needs (deaf devices, projectors, magnification devices and audible devices).				
Library environment.				
The design of the public library building is suitable for future technological developments.				
The public library has a hall designed for learning and group lessons when needed by visitors.				
The building of the public library – its entrances, exits, elevators, car parks and furniture – is suitable for providing information services for people with special needs.				
The location of the public library plays a vital role in visiting and making use of it.				
The air-conditioning level is good in the public library.				
The facilities of the public library are suitable for providing information services and activities in addition to containing information sources.				
The lighting level is good in the public library.				
Administration and financial level				
There are current or future (short- or long-term) plans to develop the public library.				
The upper management of the public library is aware of the role of libraries as a cultural centre in society.				
The high management of the public library provides a suitable and satisfactory work environment to its employees.				
The upper management of the public library encourages its employees by giving them bonuses and incentives when they offer various cultural activities to the society.				
The administration of the public library meets the professional requirements of its employees.				
The annual budget for the public library is not suitable.				
Awareness of whole library activities				
The public library has suitable signage to help visitors use the facilities easily.				
Visitors can contact the public library through social media, email and chats.				

The public library offers activities for the public, including children. It plays a cultural role by showing patriotic and documentary films and hosting exhibitions.

The website of the public library has electronic guide services and advertisements to attract visitors.

The public library distributes brochures outside the library to announce its cultural seminars and meetings.

The public library has guide booklets to help find information.

Schools of the Ministry of Education encourage their students to use the public libraries by doing their homework there.

The public library gives lectures, holds seminars, establishes exhibitions, or participates in mass media for various patriotic occasions (such as summer activities).