FEATURE: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Saudi Academic Library Leadership: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

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abstract: This is the first qualitative phenomenological study to investigate the state of leadership in Saudi libraries. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 14 library leaders or section heads in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Library leadership was found to be strongly associated with management skills, visionary thinking, teamwork, and mentorship. While almost half the participants could not differentiate between library leadership and library management, "personal attributes and skills" emerged as top assets of a library leader. Identity crises and cultural issues were identified as major challenges. Possible solutions were creating and developing user-focused services and spaces, continued professional development programs for library staff, seeking new avenues for public-private partnerships, and promoting information literacy programs. The Saudi Library and Information Association, Saudi library schools, and deanships of library affairs in Saudi universities should increase collaboration and offer more continued professional development and higher education opportunities for senior and mid-career librarians. Such steps will help to align library services with the current and ever-changing needs of library users.

Introduction

Technology's impact on educational institutions and libraries has been unprecedented. This technological revolution has enabled libraries to provide their users with easy access to multiple information sources through different platforms. It has allowed libraries to improve their accessibility, services, resources, and collections, as well as to completely restructure their management systems. These innovations have transformed the library and information science profession. Rapid technological development, changes in higher education and in users' information-seeking behavior, and the accessibility of library services 24 hours per day, seven days per week, have triggered further change.[1]

Academic Librarianship in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government strongly supports the development of the country's educational sector. One of the goals set forth by the kingdom's leadership states, "In the year 2030, we aim to have at least five Saudi universities among the top 200 universities in international rankings. We shall help our students achieve results above international averages in global education indicators."[2] In 1973, King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah became the first university to offer library and information science (LIS) education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Currently, eight universities offer LIS programs at the undergraduate level, and three do so at the graduate level.[3] More MPhil and PhD degree programs are needed in Saudi Arabia because most library professionals must travel overseas for an advanced degree.

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In Saudi Arabia, the deanship of library affairs is the main body responsible for all the libraries in a university. There are multiple central and college libraries in most universities. Each central library has a director to manage it, and departments have their own section heads and managers. The prerequisite educational qualification for professional staff in these libraries is a bachelor's or a master's degree in LIS. In rare instances, senior staff positions have been filled by leaders who lack a degree in the discipline but have significant experience in library services, practices, and matters.

Our literature review revealed that no study has investigated the state of library leadership in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This study is the first of its kind. It explores the fundamental challenges faced by Saudi library leadership and investigates the leadership skills and development strategies needed to overcome them. The study also highlights some approaches to minimize the gap between libraries and upper management, and to deliver modern library services.

Characteristics of Effective Leaders

Library leaders are expected to be transformative, democratic, authoritative, and result-oriented. They must be team players but also be decisive and get results. There is a growing focus on participative and collaborative leadership in libraries. Such leadership helps libraries to adjust to the technological revolution, globalization, and the changing information-seeking behaviors of library users. Daniel Wilson demonstrated that library leaders apply a combination of transformative and democratic measures to engage with library staff.[4] Jason Martin defined library leadership as the process of "influencing followers through the creation and managing of organizational meaning, building and maintaining relationships, and the consistent demonstration of professional and managerial competence."[5]

Three main characteristics of an effective leader are vision, inter- and intrapersonal skills, and competence. A visionary leader is expected to seek and embrace change. The inter- and intrapersonal skills are linked with relationship management and the main-

tenance of social networks. Strong personal relationships require the library leader to be approachable, trustworthy, committed, sociable, and a role model. The competence of a leader also includes the professional and management skills acquired through qualifications and experience.

One key determinant of the success of library leaders is their ability to cultivate a shared vision and to balance the expectations of both top management and their subordinates. Additionally, a library leader should be a humanist who can resolve issues through dialogue, discussion, and reasoning.[6] A leader should contribute to the greater good and the overall progress of the organization. A leader's role during times of change is to take the initiative, make

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bold decisions, and inculcate a shared vision among followers. He or she should be a positive, proactive professional instead of a passive practitioner.

Literature Review

There is limited literature on academic libraries in Saudi Arabia.[7] Moid Siddiqui investigated the challenges in Saudi academic libraries, including escalating costs of technological tools, limited library budgets, information complexity, inadequate resources, shortages of qualified professionals, lack of cooperation, and absence of supportive library-related legislation.[8] Abdulhameed Alsulaiman revealed that Saudi university libraries, in general, did not assess the effectiveness of their information services and resources.[9] N. Q. Al-Qublan found a shortage of library professionals in Saudi Arabia and a deficiency in their technical skills.[10] Khaled Matook and Ibrahim Abu El-Khair recommended that students be given opportunities to complete their studies while working, become involved in the creation of library policies and regulations, and participate in conferences and seminars.[11]

Studies on leadership in the LIS field have highlighted the major skills necessary for leaders, including communication skills, vision, and team-building ability. Strategies to develop such skills include continued professional development, mentorship, succession planning, leadership development programs, and self-development.[12] Rick Fought and Mitsunori Misawa interviewed eight library directors in academic health libraries in the United States. Five major themes emerged from their study: (1) understanding leadership, (2) building a vision, (3) relationships with staff and administration cultivated through strong communication, (4) advocating and credibility, and (5) measuring success through informal feedback from library stakeholders.[13] Fiona Harland, Glenn Steward, and Christine Bruce gathered data from interviews with 12 library directors in the United States and Australia using a grounded theory method, in which researchers review the data collected to find repeated ideas, then group them into concepts or categories. The researchers reported that a customer-focused, innovative, and collaborative culture is needed to satisfy a diversity of user needs and to demonstrate the importance of the

library.[14] Michael Maciel, Wendi Kaspar, and Wyoma vanDuinkerken investigated job openings for library directors advertised from 2011 to 2015. The analysis identified nine leadership attributes: "awareness and conscientiousness; integrity, honesty, and ethical behavior; rapport building; encouragement and accountability; development; innovation; strategic planning (practice of innovation); stewardship and sustainability; [and] formalizing service in processes and policies."[15] Binh Le revealed that higher education institutions mainly focused on such technical skills as budgeting, communication, project management, and fundraising during the selection process for library directors.[16] Many academic library leaders must search for solutions to overcome financial constraints. These may include fundraising strategies to pay for new digitization projects, modernize old buildings, and purchase access to more online journals and databases.[17]

Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Investigate the perceptions of Saudi academic library leaders about leadership.
2. Distinguish between the concepts of library leadership and library management. Some library professionals misunderstand or use these concepts interchangeably. A clear understanding of both terms helps leaders frame effective and user-focused services or strategies.
3. Identify what Saudi academic library leaders perceive as the greatest leadership assets. Every leader has strengths that help to effectively and efficiently implement vision, policies, or strategies.
4. Pinpoint the leadership challenges of Saudi academic library leaders. The library and information science profession is surrounded by challenges. An accurate understanding of these issues will help to ensure the relevance of libraries for users.
5. Discover the way forward for successful library leadership and how to align libraries with the needs of modern library users.

Methodology

To investigate the state of library leadership in Saudi Arabia, this study used a qualitative research design employing a phenomenological approach to determine the perceptions of the participants. A purposive sampling method was used to include subjects who worked in or had held leadership positions in university libraries. Data were collected from interviews with library deans, vice deans, library directors, department heads, and those in charge of library sections. A consent letter was e-mailed to the participants outlining the aims and purposes of the study. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face at the offices of the participants, while others were carried out via Skype or telephone due to geographical constraints. The average duration of each interview was around 40 minutes. The sessions were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Each interview transcription was given a unique identifier, and all files were imported into NVivo software for analysis. In the first stage, the analysis generated a total of 81 items

(codes, themes, or nodes). At the second stage, the relevant nodes were merged under their parent node and duplicates were removed. At the final stage, 26 items (grouped under five parent nodes) were retained for reporting the results.

There were 30 public universities and 13 private universities under the Ministry of Education-Higher Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the time of the study.[18] Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants, who have been given pseudonyms in this article. Male librarians held most library leadership positions (n = 12). The educational background of the professionals included MLIS (n = 8), MPhil (n = 1), and PhD (n = 5) degrees. A majority of the participants held jobs in the public sector (n = 11), and only a few worked in the private sector (n = 3). Overall, the interviewees were highly experienced. Their overall time on the job ranged from 8 to 30 years. Similarly, their leadership experience ranged from 3 to 15 years.

Results: Library Leaders' Perceptions of Leadership

Management Skills

A majority of the participants (n = 8) considered professional management skills the most important factor for the success of library leaders in Saudi Arabia. Two participants, Hanif and Amir, proposed that educational qualifications and knowledge were essential for a leader to be effective. According to Ahmed, "A leader should have the authority and powers to ascertain that his library requirements as well as user needs are met." Salim indicated that a library leader should be a committed and responsible person.

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A leader should also have good communication and interpersonal skills. Communication skills were especially important when dealing with the higher authorities, staff, and library users. Hanif commented, "[Leaders] should have negotiation skills, they should be able to convince others and have good interpersonal communication skills." Similarly, Asad observed, "[A] library leader should be [a] social, people person and be able to liaise with all departments."

According to Ayesha, "The one who is in the leadership position must have certain skills, like communication skills. They are very important. They should have also decision-making abilities, especially at the time of crises and major issues." She added, "Managerial/leadership skill is the main quality that makes a good leader."

Vision

The participants considered it critical for a library leader to be a visionary. A leader should foresee the future, think strategically, set appropriate goals, make short- and long-term plans, and align all these with the aims and objectives of the organization. According to Majid, "A vision and a capacity to digest new ideas and bring transformation [are] vital for a library leader." Similarly, Ibrahim stated, "Leadership is a process through which

Table 1.

Demographic details of the participants in the study of Saudi library leadership

Pseudonym	Gender	Educational qualification	University sector	Overall experience, in years	Years as library leader
Ali	Male	Master	Private	15	5
Hanif	Male	Master	Public	27	10
Sharjeel	Male	PhD	Public	25	12
Asad	Male	PhD	Public	27	15
Saleh	Male	Master	Public	15	6
Rashid	Male	MPhil	Public	13	5
Salim	Male	PhD	Public	8	8
Ibrahim	Male	PhD	Private	30	11
Majid	Male	Master	Public	7	5
Adnan	Male	PhD	Public	13	5
Ayesha	Female	Master	Public	17	10
Noura	Female	Master	Public	11	3
Amir	Male	Master	Public	14	5
Malik	Male	Master	Private	15	7

you can make well-informed decisions while engaging the other people around you. It is simply a process of achieving the shared goals of the institution." Malik suggested that "leaders think strategically and look at the big picture. They should be able to align library goals with the institutional objectives."

Teamwork and Mentoring

Some participants considered teamwork a critical factor for the success of any leader, especially in the library profession. Effective leaders know how to prepare and train their team members, work closely with them, support them, and share mutual successes and failures. According to Ahmed, "As is obvious from the word, as a leader, you should set a good example and be different from a regular manager. You should try to utilize all services and tools available to you in a library to make it [a] traditional as well as digital library. As leaders, we need to work together with colleagues and discuss everything with [the] team." Similarly, Saleh observed, "The institutional success and growth are bound with

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the success of a leader. A good leader leads the team and helps in fulfilling the overall mission of his institute."

Additionally, some participants considered that library leaders should act as mentors for their staff and peers. They should guide their people in professional issues, solve staff problems, and support the development of library skills among their juniors. As Ali declared, "[The] leader should be a source of inspiration for [the] staff. They should motivate and help them, as well as guide them in the day-to-day activities of the library. They should also facilitate their professional growth." Ahmed stated, "A leader needs to study the whole situation and discuss it with their staff. As a leader, you need to think and discuss things with others all the time. We learn a lot from our discussions, and it helps us make a consolidated decision. We all learn from our difficulties and failures."

Leaders versus Managers

The participants were asked what they saw as the difference between leadership and management. A majority (8 of 14) either could not differentiate between the two or had vague notions regarding the two terms. Saleh explained, "A manager is a lower category, and a leader is a higher caliber person." Similarly, Ayesha declared, "A leader possesses qualities that are superior than those of a simple manager; they are at a higher level than a manager." Amir observed that "being a leader meant supporting their team and standing side by side with them to accomplish goals, while a manager simply likes the idea of control but doesn't like to contribute towards the overall effort."

These results align with those of similar studies where the participants could not differentiate between the two concepts.[19] John Mullins and Margaret Linehan revealed that almost 80 percent of the participants in their study were confused about these ideas.[20] Murtaza Ashiq, Shafiq Ur Rehman, and Syeda Hina Batool conducted a qualitative study in Pakistan and discovered that almost half the participants had only a vague understanding of the two concepts. Some intermixed the two, while others defined them incorrectly.[21] According to Deborah Hicks and Lisa Given, leadership and management were also intermingled in the LIS curriculum.[22] Gabrielle Wong stated that the boundaries of both concepts were not fixed because of the continuously changing and expanding paradigm of librarianship.[23] Hence, there is an immediate need for continued professional development of library leaders and other

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library staff to understand these concepts, roles, and responsibilities. Courses for library leaders in Saudi Arabia that focus on leading rather than simply managing may prove productive and worthwhile.

Personal Attributes

The traits of a leader should include integrity, transparency, honesty, sincerity, loyalty, and intelligence. According to Majid, "Three things are very vital for the success of a leader: knowledge, skills, and attitude. These three are interdependent, interrelated, and

interwoven; you cannot separate one from another . . . They complement each other." Salim said that leaders "should be open-minded, accessible, committed, and unselfish."

Qualified, Experienced Teams

An experienced and qualified team also emerged as another major contributor toward the success of library leaders. Some participants recognized that leaders could not achieve professional goals on their own. They must connect with their team members and work with them to achieve the group's goals. As Rashid stated, "A library leader is a person that works with the team to achieve set goals and objectives. A leader cannot do anything alone. They have to socially connect with the team." He elaborated, "They should have a good skilled team. Here, in our IAU [Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University], all achievements are because of a good versatile team." According to Adnan, "A leader should be socially connected with their colleagues and take care of them. Simple things like asking them about their health and personal issues mean a great deal to them and provide the leader with an opportunity to make a close connection with their team."

Library-Minded Authorities

Three participants shared that a library-focused head and higher authorities, including the dean, vice dean, and head of library affairs, were critical for bringing transformative change in library services, resources, and design. Some library leaders indicated that professional qualifications and experience in library and information science were helpful in communicating with higher authorities in an organization. According to Ali, "It is best if a library head has basic library education. Otherwise, they should at least have library experience and know how to deal with library-related matters." One participant considered formal library education less necessary than having the required technical and technological skills.

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Adnan stated, "Professional library qualification is not necessary, but a leader should be aware of basic library philosophy and especially aware of technical matters related to libraries." He said, "They should be library minded and should also be technologically well versed."

Results: Library Leadership Challenges

Identity crises and cultural issues, causing library professionals to question their purpose or career path, emerged as major challenges perceived by library leaders in Saudi Arabia. These were followed by services challenges, limitations of library space and design, technological challenges, skills gaps among library staff, and financial constraints.

Identity Crises and Cultural Issues

A majority of the participants (n = 12) perceived identity crises and cultural issues as the top two challenges in the country. According to Noura, "As compared to other professions like doctors and engineers, our society undervalues librarians, and that's why locals also don't join this profession." Salim explained, "We don't have enough Saudis with advanced degrees in library science, like a master's degree or a PhD, and even if they hold such degrees, [a] majority of them prefer to work as teaching faculty rather than as a practitioner of the discipline." Hanif commented, "We have to follow administrative powers. Most administrative heads are Saudi nationals. Even if you [refer to] international policies, they are hesitant to implement them as some of them believe that they are not feasible in the local scenario."

The results of this study align with those of an earlier study that reported identity crisis as a top issue.[24] David McMenemy; Binh Le; Ashiq, Rehman, and Batool; Maggie Farrell; and Carl Straumsheim determined that the fundamental reason for the identity crisis was the sluggish and passive response and reluctance to change of library professionals and leaders.[25] In Saudi Arabia, a major contributor to the identity crisis is that few people enter librarianship because of the lack of esteem attached to it.

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Some participants perceived that the professional knowledge of a library leader was key to addressing problems and challenges effectively. According to Rashid, "It is necessary for a library leader to hold a professional degree. This is similar to a doctor needing an MBBS [bachelor of medicine and bachelor of surgery] degree to treat patients and run a hospital." Hanif posited that the main reason behind the identity crisis was a lack of commitment by library professionals. He explained, "Some of the professionals are doing unnecessary tasks which are not required for the library and divert the focus away from what is actually needed in the library. Original service-oriented professionalism is lacking." Salim described the cultural issues and explained that "in relation to female library services, social and cultural influences do not allow you to serve the male and female library users at the same level."

Services Challenges and Space Issues

The participants (n = 11) perceived that outdated services, inadequate physical space for group work, and managing vast amounts of printed resources were the fundamental challenges faced by academic libraries in Saudi Arabia. Some interviewees highlighted that users demanded quick service delivery, especially related to information-seeking tools needed for their research projects, such as reference management software, SPSS, and advanced searching in discovery platforms. Two participants, Hanif and Ibrahim, highlighted the need for printing facilities in the libraries and suggested an increase in the library's hours of operations. Majid observed, "Even though user behavior has changed significantly, [the] majority of users still cannot search Google effectively."

Limited space for libraries and lack of planning for library design and buildings represented further challenges. According to Ali,

> We have a problem regarding space, especially [the] library building. In the new university building, we have not been given a proper library building, even though, before the start of construction work, we were given the building plans from the administration. However, when we gave the feedback regarding inadequacy of [the] library building according to the standardized academic library designs, we were informed that it was too late to incorporate some of our suggestions.

Rashid reported, "Space is a big issue, and our current building cannot cover future space requirements for our print resources." Two participants, Ayesha and Noura, observed that limited space prevented them from offering areas for group discussions and community activities in their libraries. Salim mentioned that the remote location of the central library forced students, especially women (who typically travel in their own vehicles), to spend much time and energy to reach the library.

Technological Challenges

Technological challenges (n = 10) emerged as another major area of concern for Saudi libraries. The Internet and rapid technological development have led to a revolution in libraries and many other disciplines.[26] According to Ali,

> There are two types of technologies, active and passive. Active means those technologies that are directly related to users and are used by them in their routine library activities. Passive technologies are like RFID [radio-frequency identification] tags, RFID gates, and LS [library system] software. Libraries need to do more work on the provision of active technologies, e.g., increasing computer terminals, scanning, and printing facilities, etc.

Rashid indicated that library leaders and staff needed to be well versed in the latest technological trends and stated that "technologies can become a challenge; e.g., artificial intelligence is soon going to be widely used in libraries. Library leaders should know about all of these new innovations. They should have technical know-how of all current and future technologies and IT-related issues." Two participants, Asad and Salim, expressed concern about rapidly changing technologies. Salim stated, "Almost every six months or so, we witness [an] emergence of new ideas, equipment, technologies, or applications. So, we should try to be aware of these advances, and our team has to be educated regarding the use of these technologies. We should be aware of what is happening in the world."

Two participants, Adnan and Ayesha, reported that their users were technologically savvy and ahead of library staff in adopting the latest technologies, tools, and platforms. Ayesha stressed the need for learning the latest IT-related software and highlighted the importance of information and communication applications for libraries. According to Malik, "Our leaders are from a generation that was not born in technology, so their skill set in that regard is lacking. This technological gap between users and library leaders is a great challenge. We need to meet the users at their level."

Professional Skills Deficiencies

A lack of up-to-date skills among working library professionals was also highlighted as another prominent challenge. Saudi Arabia offers limited learning opportunities for library professionals. They must be proactive and arrange their learning opportunities themselves, and many are self-taught. Saleh shared, "Training the professionals is a challenge as there aren't many training opportunities here. In the last four years, we have had only one training opportunity." Rashid stated, "Time-bound

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user services will be a challenge as our Saudi institutional society is going towards more research and development and our staff have limited R&D skills." Hanif observed that "many of the staff (mainly expatriates) are not sure about the duration of their stay in the country, so they are not motivated to focus on future needs. They only focus on day-to-day activities and tasks." Ahmed and Salim stressed the need for the continued professional development of librarians but cited a lack of the proper structure for doing so.

Overcoming Challenges

Participants proposed several strategies to overcome library challenges and to align Saudi libraries with the needs of modern library users. Four major themes emerged from the data: user-focused services and space, continued professional development of the staff, public and private partnership, and information literacy programs.

User-Focused Services and Space

A majority of the participants (n = 13) declared that user-focused services and maximum utilization of library space for users should be the top priority for Saudi libraries. The library leaders saw an immediate need for redesigning library services and spaces with a focus on inclusion of the major devices, technological tools, and software applications that modern users favored. Ali stated, "Library leader[s] should provide services which are compatible to the latest technologies. Devices used by the users, like mobile devices, should be utilized to provide them barcode scanning, QR [quick response] code scanning,

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books page scan, etc." Similarly, Adnan added, "We need to redesign our services to overcome the technological and user-related challenges, e.g., we can use Google Drive

and similar tools." Ayesha stated, "We must upgrade our services. We must develop user-friendly services using IT, virtual things, artificial intelligence, etc." According to Amir, "[The] world has moved fast, and users are smarter these days. So, we should redesign the library space and services in a smarter way keeping the future needs of users in mind."

Some participants perceived that users avoided libraries because of inadequate library space and shortages of such amenities as discussion rooms and snack shops. A redesign of library space would overcome these drawbacks. According to Rashid, "We can create [a] library café, learning commons, library discussion rooms, and community engagement spaces." Malik shared, "As user requirements and experiences are changing, a simple table, chair, or a light no longer suffice, they need plugs to connect their devices, Wi-Fi hot spots, and comfortable seating for extended periods of study, etc." According to Hanif, the library should be a one-stop solution for users with the capability to fulfill all their needs related to information, data, materials, and research. Asad explained, "We can open a cafeteria in the library, where they can take the book[s] or laptop and sit with a cup of coffee so that they can study for long hours."

Continued Professional Development

The participants reported limited learning opportunities for library staff, resulting in a widening skills gap between library professionals in Saudi Arabia and those in other countries around the world. The library leaders stressed the need for frequent professional development and learning opportunities for staff (n = 12). Rashid stated, "We can overcome these challenges by training the existing professional staff, especially those in research support services. We should also work on enhancing user-staff interaction." Saleh highlighted the roles that library associations and the deanship of library affairs can play. He argued, "The library associations and deanship of library affairs should step forward and officially provide [a] platform to share knowledge and skills among the librarians in the kingdom." Malik stressed the need for training technical staff and shared that "training opportunities usually do not reach junior staff. [An] effort should be made to provide training opportunities to the technical staff of the libraries." Some participants suggested there should be appreciation and acknowledgment for those professionals who were self-taught and tried to learn skills by themselves. Ali emphasized, "This is one of the most important things; if our staff is not encouraged by the leadership and if the opportunities are not provided in the future, we cannot achieve our goals."

Some participants asserted that the Saudi Library and Information Association and LIS schools could play a more active role in enhancing the skills of young and mid-career library professionals. According to Malik, "Library schools and training institutions should introduce training courses for leaders and staff, and further augment existing trainings. Staff promotion can be linked to these courses." Adnan added, "We can solve many problems by working together. There is a society of Saudi

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libraries that conducted a conference in Riyadh two years back. We need to have more such activities."

Public-Private Partnerships

New public-private partnerships emerged as another possible solution to overcome the challenges faced by academic libraries in Saudi Arabia. Some participants (n = 8) perceived that such partnerships could maximize the utilization of library resources and services as well as provide an opportunity to collaborate with national and international organizations. Such ties could help foster the development of required skills among library professionals. According to Ali, "This is the best way to solve many problems in relation to skills, resources, and budgetary issues. Some courses can also be offered by public and private partnerships so that we can learn from each other." According to Adnan, "Photocopy machine[s], translation services, paid training courses, and similar services can be offered through such partnerships." Similarly, Hanif suggested that "we can share our services and spaces with the corporate sector and local communities. Our library location is in the middle of the city, we can open it for the community. Even a children's library can be opened. [The] Dhahran cultural center [King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture] is offering paid memberships." Likewise, Rashid stated,

> We can train multinational company employees, we can provide information literacy programs to ARAMCO [the state-owned oil company], SABIC [a petrochemical manufacturer], etc. Many big companies have their learning resource centers, and we can give trainings to their users and staff. We can also generate funds by offering them corporate memberships.

Information Literacy Programs

Information literacy programs emerged as an important area for the training of library users as perceived by the library leaders (n = 8). Some leaders highlighted that users faced difficulties while searching for relevant materials and sources. Most users preferred to get materials from the library staff instead of looking themselves, according to Ahmed and Saleh. The participants thought that library staff should be skilled enough to train library users through information literacy programs. Saleh also elaborated on the effectiveness of an information literacy program:

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> When we gave our proposal for instituting an information literacy plan, higher management did not immediately come on board. They asked me to do a trial run with the faculty first. We were only allowed to do a general rollout of the trainings after we received positive feedback and appreciation from the faculty. Prior to our ILP [information literacy program], we used to get more that 600–700 article requests annually, now our users are literate enough and we only receive around 100 queries.

Discussion

The Importance of Vision and Communication

The results of this study align with those of earlier research that identified vision as a top leadership skill for library leaders.[27] Further, most participants indicated that effective communication was also desirable. They shared that communication skills would enable section heads to interact effectively with the decision-makers, such as deans and other university higher authorities, and to engender greater confidence.

Leadership Attributes

An earlier study by Ashiq, Rehman, and Batool on senior Pakistani library leaders found that the best attributes for a library leader were charisma and a humanistic attitude, team-building and managing skills, and the ability to develop and maintain relationships with higher administrations.[28] A library leader equipped with updated knowledge, skills, and expertise can be a trendsetter and can bring about transformational change in libraries. Such leaders are in high demand and are critical for modernizing libraries and realigning library resources, services, staff skills, and expertise according to the needs of library users. Leadership must utilize innovative practices to remain relevant.[29]

Previous studies, including those of Hicks and Given, Mohammed Aslam, and Ashiq, Rehman, and Batool, identified financial challenges as pervasive in the profession.[30] This study, however, did not find financial issues to be a major difficulty in Saudi Arabia.

The identified gap in the skill set of junior library staff needs to be addressed through a more active role by the deanship of library affairs.[31] Nevertheless, the situation has improved because library staff now have faculty status in some Saudi universities and are involved in publishing research, receiving reimbursement for publication fees, and taking advantage of learning opportunities.

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The Way Forward

Most of the library leaders indicated a need for expanding the library service pattern from a purely traditional one to a more technologically oriented style, with a special focus on modern high-tech tools and applications. Advances in technology have greatly changed library resources and services and have influenced users' information-seeking behavior.[32] Library leaders perceive a need for continued professional development of librarians so that they are better equipped to address the information needs of modern library users. The parent organizations and deanships of library affairs need to support their employees in their quest for self-development. The Saudi Library and Information Association also should be encouraged to offer better training opportunities for library professionals via collaborations with library schools and deanships of library affairs.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

This is the first-ever study investigating library leadership in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. However, it has some limitations. The data were collected from 14 library leaders or section heads, and the point of view of the top university-level administration is lacking. A future in-depth study with representation of other library leaders will help to better understand library leadership in Saudi Arabia. Feedback from library schools and the Saudi Library and Information Association would contribute significantly to such a study. Research investigating women library leaders in Saudi Arabia would also be worthwhile.

Conclusion

This is the first comprehensive study exploring the perceptions of senior library professionals regarding library leadership in Saudi Arabia. The study identified the views of library leaders about library leadership, differences between leadership and management, leaders' best attributes and assets, leaders' challenges, and possible solutions. Identity crises and cultural issues emerged as top challenges for leaders, along with services challenges, technological difficulties, and deficiencies in professionals' skill sets. Some possible ways to address these challenges are to redesign library services and spaces, offer better continued professional development opportunities, and develop public-private partnerships and information literacy programs. Collaborative efforts among deanships of library affairs, the Saudi Library and Information Association, Saudi library schools, and the Special Libraries Association-Arabian Gulf Chapter for the professional skills development of librarians are essential for the success of LIS in Saudi Arabia. Recruitment of local students into LIS educational programs is critical, and more Saudi universities and library schools should offer professional degree programs at the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate level. There is a special need for the initiation of doctoral programs in the country. Such efforts would ultimately lead to a better future for librarianship in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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