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Evaluation of the interlibrary loan services in Iran: a case study of the AMIN service

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Abstract

Purpose – this article aims to evaluate the use and the costs of AMIN the interlibrary loan service in Iran.

Design/methodology/approach – A questionnaire was used for the data collection which was completed by those librarians in charge of AMIN in the academic libraries.

Findings – The statistics collected from six libraries showed that 514 items were loaned, of which 49% were journal articles and 43% were books. Post was used for the delivery of about 55% of the items, while email was only used for the delivery of only 7% of the items. The average time spent for dealing with each request (the time lapse between reception of the request and dispatching the item) was about 7.1 days. The library of the University of Tehran was the most effective library in this regard as it only took 3.4 days on average for each request. The study revealed that the participating libraries did not have a proper procedure in place for collecting usage statistics and therefore one cannot evaluate the effectiveness of the AMIN service.

Originality/value – The paper reveals the cost of document supply in Iranian academic libraries and illustrates that the ILL services in Iran are not efficient and measures could be taken to reduce the cost and increase the efficiency of the services.

Keywords Interlibrary loan, AMIN, Iran, cost-benefit analysis, academic libraries

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Interlibrary loaning (ILL) services in Iranian academic libraries started in the late 1970s when the Iranian Research Institute for Information Science and Technology (Irandoc) started to act as the coordinator of an ILL project for the academic and research institutes. However, due to problems such as slow service process, inadequate information network, cost overruns, and lack of financial supports, the project was not successful. The project was reviewed in 1983 and special ILL Vouchers called *Bahamohr* were introduced as an alternative form of payment in order to facilitate interlibrary transactions. The ILL Voucher proved not to be problem-free, and ILL services were stopped due to the reluctance of libraries to cooperate adequately. In 1997, Irandoc started a program called “Designing a New System of ILL” in order to redesign and launch a new ILL service. The new service was called AMIN [1] and started in 2000. The subscribing nature of AMIN led to a nation-wide ILL system in which all universities and research corporations are allowed to participate. Membership in the AMIN service is for two year periods and after each period libraries can renew their membership. Since 2000, four membership periods have been completed and the fifth period was from 2006 to 2009. The libraries that participate in AMIN can borrow items (e.g. books, journals, articles and so on) from other participants across the country or request a copy of the item if possible. The libraries must pay for the services using *Bahamohr* vouchers which can be obtained from Irandoc. In order to guarantee the replacement of the lost and damaged documents, libraries must place a security deposit with Irandoc. Currently 148 academic and research libraries participate in AMIN.

AMIN has two types of member libraries: direct and indirect. Direct members are normally central libraries of Iranian universities. These act as hubs and are directly in contact with other direct member libraries. Indirect members are those libraries that send and receive the requests through a direct member and they are not directly in contact with other member libraries.

It should be said that there is another resource sharing service in Iran called Ghadir, which is similar to the SCONUL Research Extra scheme in the UK, by which postgraduate students and faculty members of each university can directly borrow material from any other library that is a member of Ghadir scheme. AMIN, however, is a more comprehensive national interlibrary lending agreement.

Past studies on interlibrary cooperation in Iran have focused on Ghadir. In spite of its large number of participants and nation-wide coverage, AMIN has not yet been studied probably because of the lack of well-recorded reports and statistics. Extensive studies are required in order to understand the advantages and disadvantages of this service and to run it more effectively in the future. Therefore, this article aims to evaluate the AMIN ILL services in Iran in terms of costs and usage.

Literature review

There have been a few studies on resource sharing and ILL in Iran, but no studies have been conducted on AMIN. Neshat (1996) found that only 28% of academic and special libraries in Iran cooperated. She maintained that the reasons for this were lack

of union catalogues, lack of facilities and technologies, bureaucratic barriers and lack of managerial knowledge and vision by library managers. Panahi (2005) conducted a survey of users in order to evaluate Ghadir and found that about 60% of users in Tehran were very satisfied with the service. In another study of Ghadir, Alidousti and Nazari (2000) found that during the four years of the test period of the project 2,019 books were borrowed by 1,797 graduate students and 520 faculty members; about 93% of these items were borrowed in Tehran.

A study of 76 US and Canadian research libraries showed that a research library spent on average \$18.62 to borrow a research document or article or to purchase a photocopy of the item and \$10.93 to lend a document. Staff costs represented about 77% of the cost for borrowing and lending; 16% of the total was for supervisory staff and 61% for nonsupervisory staff (Roche, 1993). Another study for the Association of Research Libraries, (Jackson, 1998) showed that on average, the unit cost to research libraries to borrow an item on interlibrary loan was \$18.35, and the cost to lend an item was \$9.48. Average borrowing turnaround time was 16 calendar days. On average, ILL operations in college libraries had better performance measures than ILL operations in research libraries. Liu and Lei (2008) conducted a costing study of document supply at Wuhan University Library, and investigated the difference in costs over time and the cost-effectiveness for the university. Their study showed that the borrowing unit cost and lending unit cost decreased by 27% and 60%, respectively, between 2002 and 2004, but showed a small increase in 2006. In 2004, 10,860 articles were requested by WUL patrons and 9,545 requests were fulfilled.

Methods

Apart from the data that were obtained from the main office of AMIN at Irandoc, a print questionnaire was personally delivered to the librarians who were in charge of ILL services at six academic libraries in Tehran (capital). These libraries were direct members of AMIN. The questionnaire included demographic and statistical questions as well as questions about librarians' perceptions of the service. Detailed statistics of the use of ILL services were also requested from the libraries and six libraries agreed to provide such information. It should be noted that there were also 29 indirect members who relied on these direct members for ILL services. The data was collected in January 2010 and included records from 2001 to 2009.

Findings

As Figure 1 shows, many libraries joined AMIN at its outset but the membership dropped in the second phase which could indicate that the first phase had not been very successful from the librarians' perspective. However, the number of participating libraries has moderately increased again during the third to fifth phases of the service. In the fifth phase of the service, there were 38 direct and 110 indirect libraries taking part in AMIN.

Figure 1. Number of member libraries of AMIN

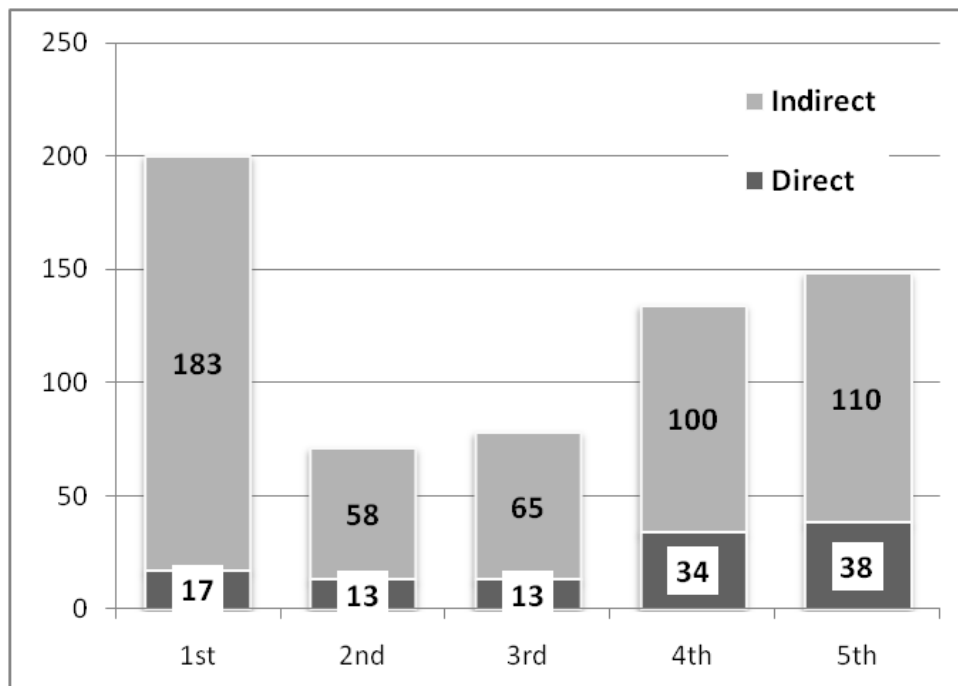


Figure 2 shows the number of requests received by the member libraries as well as the number of the items they provided in response to those requests. Similar to the number of members, the number of items requested and provided was relatively high in the beginning (359 requests in 2002) but decreased gradually till 2004 when again it started to increase. The low number for 2009 is because the data collection was done in the middle of the year and is thus incomplete.

Figure 2. Requested and provided items in AMIN

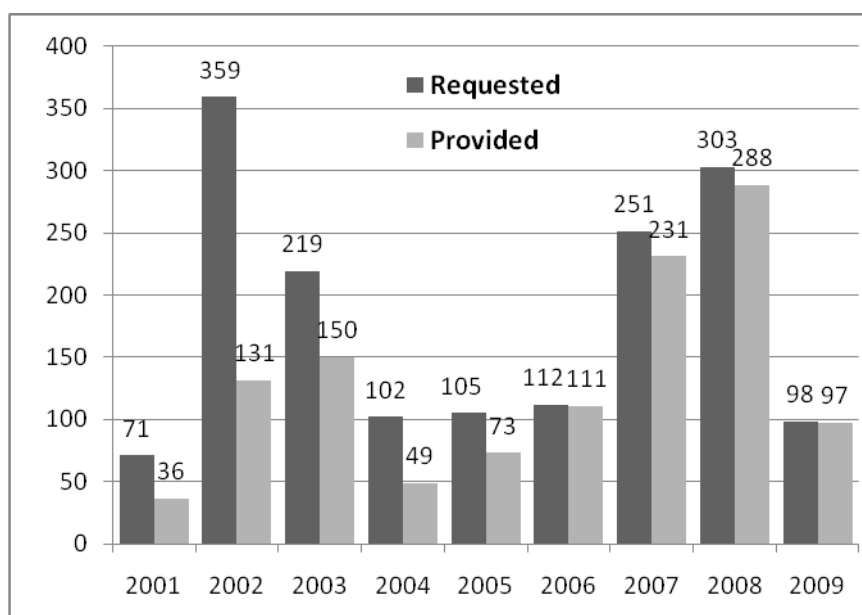
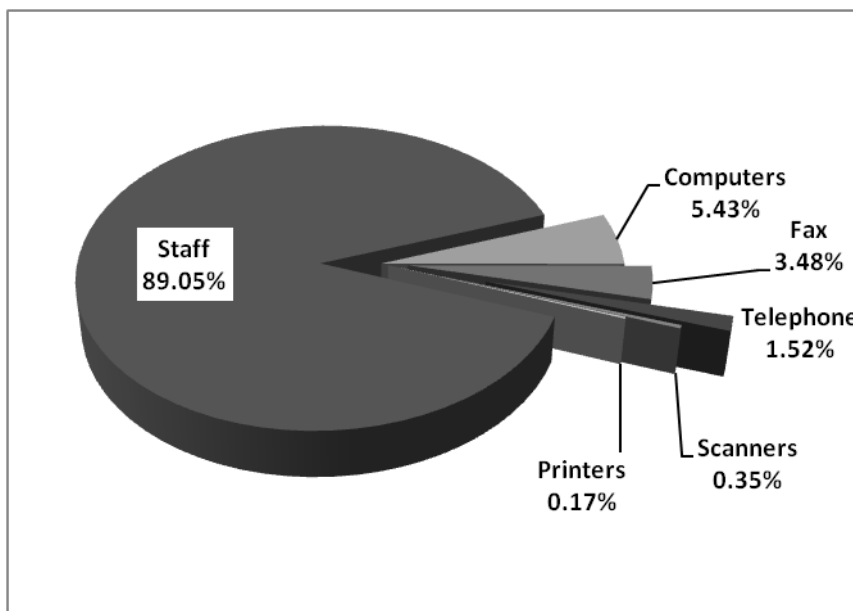


Figure 3 shows the cost component of ILL services, based on the data collected through the survey. Staff salaries account for 89% of the cost of ILL services. The remainder is accounted for by IT and communication, including computers (5.4%) and fax (3.5%).

Figure 3. Distribution of costs of ILL services at AMIN member libraries



Using the number of documents provided through AMIN and the costs of the service, a cost-benefit analysis was conducted to compare the productivity of AMIN in different participating libraries. Table 1 summarizes the ranking of six active participants. The ranking is based on the total cost-per-item (CPI). Sharif University of Technology proved to be the most cost-effective as service for each ILL item cost less than one dollar for this library while the cost for Payam-e Noor University was more than 25 dollars.

It has to be said that the average price of an academic book published in Iran is about 10 USD. Therefore, providing documents through AMIN service seems highly costly especially for Persian books. However, our study showed that ILL service in Iran is used mainly for foreign (mainly English language) books and journal articles. Out of 522 items delivered in the fifth phase of AMIN service, 258 were English language books and 225 were English language journal articles.

Table 1. Ranking top AMIN participants for Cost-Per-Item (CPI)

Library	<i>CPI (US Dollars)</i>	Ranking
Sharif	0.75	1st
Malek Ashtar	1.85	2nd
Al-Zahra	2.04	3rd
Shahed	3.31	4th
Tehran - Science	12.77	5th
Payam-e Noor	24.52	6th

Universities performed differently in terms of the time spent to deal with a request. Table 2 indicates that the library of Science Faculty of the University of Tehran was the most efficient in sending out the items for which it had received requests. This library also ranked the first in terms of time taken for an item to be delivered to this library.

Table 2. Time for sending and receiving documents in AMIN (in days).

	Sending	Receiving	Total
Al Zahra	6.8	5.3	6.1
Malek-e Ashtar	-	11.2	11.2
Tehran - Science	5.3	3.2	4.3
Shahed	11.3	9.3	10.3
Sharif	9.1	16.9	13.0
Payam-e Noor	-	7.0	7.0
Average	8.1	8.8	8.5

The main method used for the delivery of items by libraries was postal (55% of items). Use of fax and email was not high; however, these tools were mainly used for journal articles. The libraries did not record the delivery method they used for 111 items.

Table 3. Delivery methods used for ILL items by libraries

Delivery method	%	No
Post	54.78	286
Fax	16.47	86
Email	7.47	39
Unknown	21.26	111
total	100	522

In the survey, the librarians were asked about the benefits of AMIN (Figure 4) and the problems they think hinder the efficiency of the service (Figure 5). Four main benefits of AMIN from the librarians' viewpoint were that the AMIN ILL service helps them meet information needs of the users; it creates ease of access to information resources; it saves the time of users and themselves; and it facilitates resource sharing and collaborations among the libraries.

On the other hand, the main problem that librarians face in AMIN was the bureaucratic time consuming procedures (42%). The other major problem was the lack of users' knowledge about AMIN. Many users still do not know that such a service exists at their university library.

Figure 4. The benefits of AMIN from the librarians' viewpoint

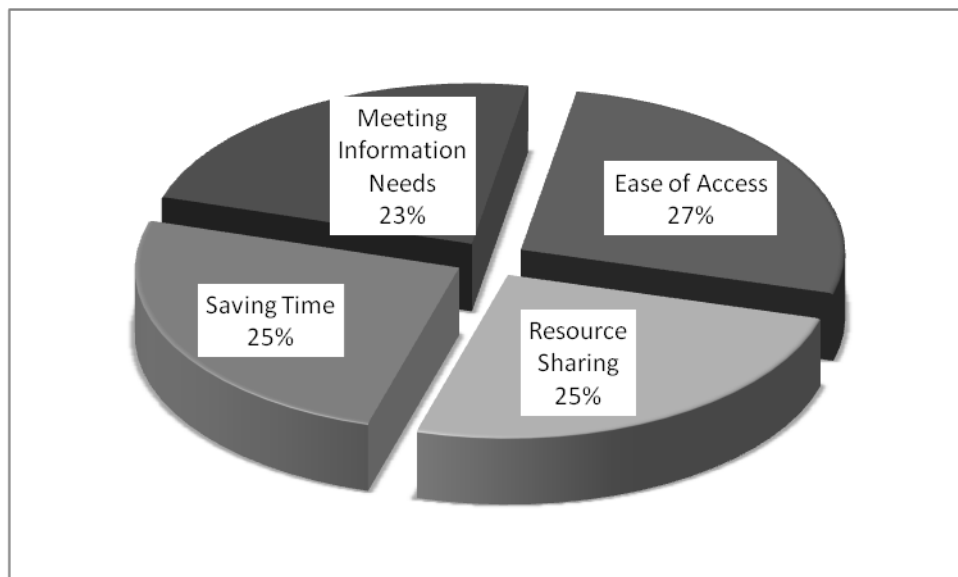
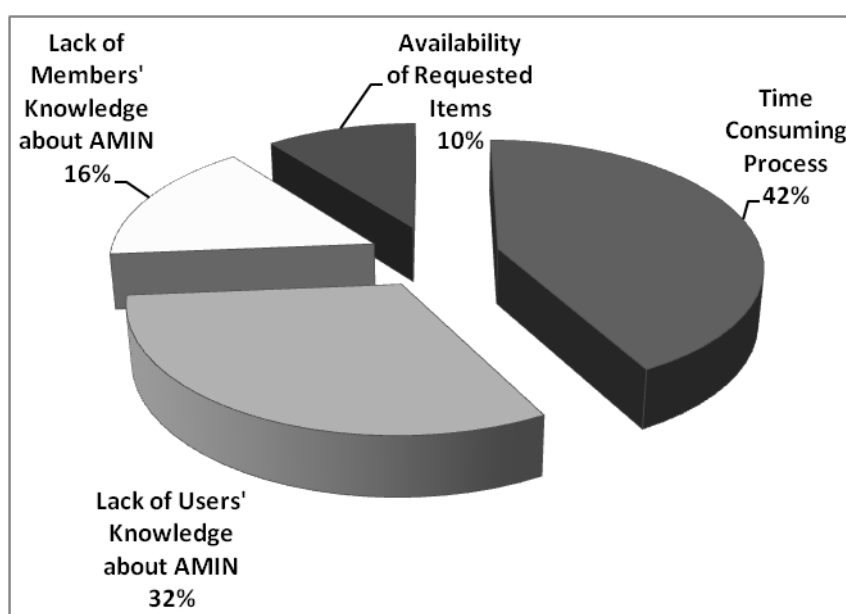
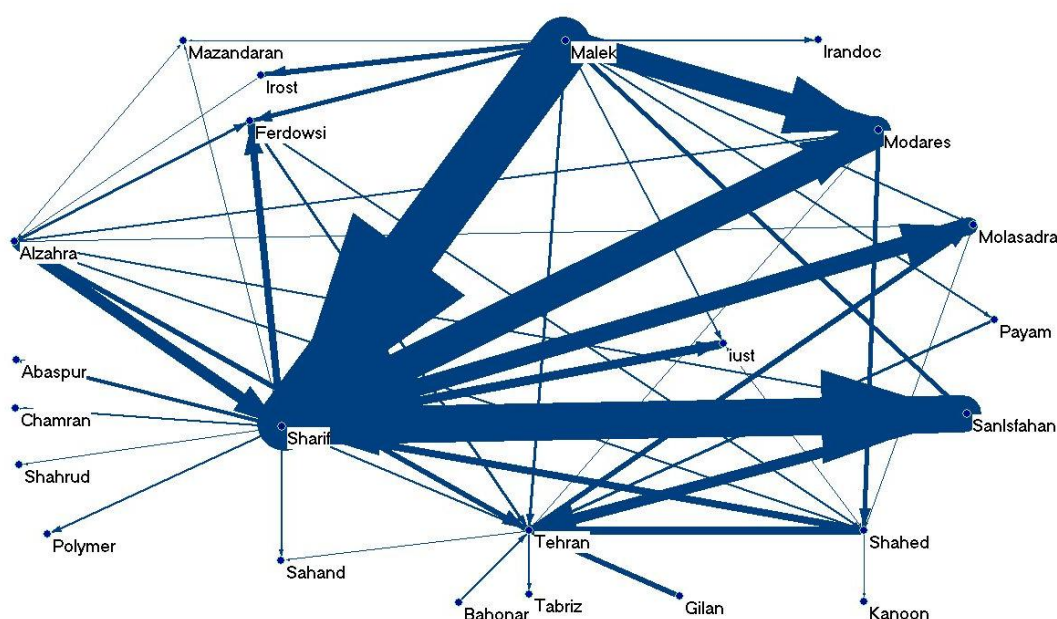


Figure 5. Problems with AMIN from the librarians' viewpoint



To complete the study on AMIN, it was desired to illustrate how the participating libraries were connected. We used Pajek (de Nooy, Mrvar and Batagelj, 2005) to create a network of ILL cooperation between the universities (Figure 6). Each node represents a university library and the arrows show the relation between the libraries. The library that the arrow points to is the receiver of the ILL items. The thicker the arrow the higher the number of delivered items. Some universities such as Sharif Universality of Technology were very active users of AMIN both in terms of requesting items and providing items for other universities, and some others were mainly receiver of the service (such as University of Tehran). The main AMIN document providers can be considered the hub libraries because of their higher level of contribution.

Figure 6. Network of ILL cooperation between universities



Conclusion

The findings of this study show that AMIN has not proved as successful as it was expected. A few hundred ILL items in a year in a country with about 200 universities and 3,580,000 students (enrolled in 2009-2010 academic year) does not sound much, especially if compared to a few thousand requests in just one institute such as the one described in Liu and Lei (2008).

Besides the low number of ILL requests in Iranian academic libraries which seems to have a few reasons including lack of awareness of the service among user and inefficient procedures, the ILL process and administration is not efficient. During the course of our data collection it was revealed that there was no uniform method for recording and collecting the statistics of the services in place. Some libraries did not pay enough attention to this issue simply because they thought that the central office of AMIN in Irandoc would not require them to do so.

The use of new technologies for ILL services was also not high as a considerable part of the service and procedure is still paper-based and librarians do not make enough use of the Internet and services such as email.

The cost-effective analysis of AMIN in six universities revealed that not only is there a remarkable difference among the rate of cost-per-item (CPI) in different libraries but also the average cost for providing one document is relatively high.

In terms of the relation between the libraries, as Figure 6 shows, it is possible to distinguish some libraries as core participants. Such libraries may play a higher role in the future for AMIN.

It has to be said that our study was restricted to the main academic libraries in Tehran. AMIN has developed as a national service and the figures and statistics for the universities in other cities may differ from those calculated for Tehran.

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