

Investigation of student's preferences for off-campus informal learning spaces: The case of business school students in Bangkok

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Abstract

The understanding of why students select off-campus informal learning spaces can reflect any absence and inadequacy of on-campus informal learning spaces. This research used students of a Bangkok private university as a case study by employed quantitative analysis and descriptive data analysis, where a questionnaire survey conducted during March 2018 was used. The results show that students with any levels of grade point averages have similar preferences for using off-campus informal learning spaces. The top reasons why students used off-campus spaces for informal learning were about the flexible schedule, accessibility to food, and capability for social interactions. The top reasons why students did not use off-campus spaces related to cost, location, improper environment/atmosphere and study resources. The preferences for off-campus informal learning spaces remarkably reflect the strengths and weaknesses of on-campus informal learning spaces. Universities should improve their management of facilities to support students' informal learning base on their preferences.

Keywords: Higher education institutions, informal learning spaces, learning spaces, off-campus.

1. Introduction

Learning spaces do not just limit within university campus territory. While universities provide formal learning spaces for scheduled teaching and learning (Middleton, 2018), many students use off-campus facilities to study and/or to do other related learning activities. Informal learning spaces (ILS) include both inside and outside of both library spaces and university's borderline. Universities have their duties to provide both formal learning spaces, such as regular classrooms, and informal learning spaces, such as the library and other common areas, for students and staff. The arrangement of such spaces should logically and functionally match study activities and viewpoints of students, who are the primary users. However, such arrangement is not easily done by all higher education institutions (HEI) because of unclear understandings, limited budgets or even neglected of the issues. Any deficiency of on-campus ILS arrangement might drive students to use off-campus ILS for informal learning.

It is interesting to find out where and why students use off-campus ILS rather than on-campus ILS. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether students with different academic attributes, such as cumulative grade point average (CGPA) and undergraduate levels, have any similarity or difference in choosing off-campus ILS or not. The findings from this research can both reflect any drawback of on-campus facilities that cannot accommodate the study activities of students and pinpoint any improvement of on-campus facilities to support informal learning.

The objective of this research was to find out about students' selection for *off-campus ILS* for learning activities. The aims of this study were: (a) to understand where students study off-campus and (b) to explore the reasons and perceptions of why students select or do not select off-campus ILS. This research took undergraduate students studying the business school of a Bangkok Private University (BPU) in Thailand as a case study. The scope covered any off-campus ILS, but only physical/tangible learning spaces—excluding virtual/web-based ILS. This research initiates the study about the usages and selections of off-campus ILS.

2. Literature review

Past research in ILS and HEI largely focused on inside university territory, such as libraries and canteens, but scarcely focused on outside university territory. The following sections reviewed related past research, focusing only on off-campus ILS, in two aspects: (a) Spaces for Informal Learning and (b) Environment and Facilities Required. The terms are first defined for clarifications and then followed by the discussions.

2.1. Spaces for informal learning

The non-formal learning space is defined as the spectrum of spaces beyond the formal learning spaces to support non-scheduled learning. Such spaces include those offered by supporting services, information commons and learning hubs and connecting spaces for breakout learning activities, independent study, working alongside, group study, networking and socializing (Dugdale, 2009).

Spaces for informal learning can be in various forms, virtual and physical. *Virtual spaces*, or so mentioned as digital (Middleton, 2018), are online communication platforms, which have been contributed and have changed the internal nature of education (Kio & Negreiros, 2013; Park, 2011). Various forms of web tools/technologies allow opportunities for learners to extend and then combine their formal learning into more informal places (Hall, 2009). Vanichvatana (2018a) has recently found that students applied virtual spaces to extend the functions of Home/Dorm for group/team activities.

Physical ILS—for on-campus ones, include numerous types of spaces, such as university libraries, students' union, discussion rooms and formal teaching environments—when they are not used for classes. Physical ILS—for off-campus ones include (a) Home/Dorm, (b) Café and Catering Outlet and (c) Coworking Spaces. The followings explain these three types of off-campus ILS:

Home/Dorm is one of highly preferred ILS, mostly when students work alone (Vanichvatana 2018a). Nevertheless, inherent distraction, which lies within a comfortable atmosphere at home/dorm, makes some learners find it difficult to study there (Harrop & Turpin, 2013). In addition, Harrop and Turpin (2013) stated that home was not frequently selected as a place suitable for group work. In contrast, Vanichvatana (2018a) identified that studying for group work at home/dorm was more feasible with the support of virtual/digital spaces.

Cafe (including catering outlets), especially off-campus ones, is a type of ILS (Humter & Cox, 2014; Waxman, 2006). This type of spaces allows learners to study with or without requirements to purchase food. There were several previous studies that converted unused or low traffic areas into sharing ILS. La Trobe University converted under-utilised spaces to become ILS with cafe-style ambience for a group and private studies (Riddle & Souter, 2012).

Coworking space is defined as a shared workspace where diverse groups of freelancers, remote workers and other independent professionals work together (Butler, 2008; Spreitzer, Bacevice & Garrett, 2015). This type of social learning spaces has been increasingly recognised as one of the most social learning spaces which is a shared working environment. Vanichvatana (2018b) has conducted a research survey of 300 users of coworking spaces located along the Bangkok Mass Transit Sky-train stations. One interesting result showed that 67% of the respondents were students, while the rest were users who worked in various occupational areas (advertisement, design, information technology, marketing and sales). Vanichvatana (2018b) also found that coworking spaces have been used as off-campus ILS for several learning activities. The top frequency usage of coworking spaces was for group discussions and term/team projects.

2.2. Learning facilities and learning environments required

Learning Facilities: Students normally demand furniture and technology to support their learning. The main reasons that make students use ILS rather than libraries are furniture that is convenient and comfortable, allowed spreading out of personal possessions and the availability of resources (Harrop & Turpin, 2013; Vondracek, 2007). Students preferred flexible furniture that can be adjusted to suit their needs to fixed furniture, such as lecture theatres that tend to make them feel restricted to spread out their belongings (Bennett, 2006; Bodnar, 2009). Technology refers mainly to the availability of internet access. Availability of free Wi-Fi can enhance popularity for common space usage (Lippincott, 2010). So, the strength of the internet signal is also important.

Learning Environments: Each student has different preferences for learning environments which consist of several factors of environment characteristics of spaces, such as background atmosphere. The preferred atmosphere can range from two extreme aspects, from enhancing privacy to the extreme contrast in socialised networking. Background atmosphere greatly influences students' choices of study location. Students adapt their study habits to fit the learning spaces that they like (Humter & Cox, 2014). Vanichvatana (2018a) showed that the three top preferred environments of ILS are 'Place where users can share ideas', 'Place where eating and drinking are allowed' and 'Quiet places'. In addition, the top preferred equipment/facilities is/are high-speed Wi-Fi.

3. Methodology

This study employed quantitative research through descriptive statistics to do data analysis. The research design used questionnaire surveys. The surveys, conducted in March 2018, used the case of business school students of a BPU. This university is located at the far eastern side of Bangkok Metropolitan, Thailand. BPU is situated about 49 kilometres from Bangkok central business districts (CBD), which takes around 1 hour and 15 minutes. The total number of students at BPU was about 6,000 students attending this business school during the survey period.

The questions and multiple choices were created, based on past research in several aspects, as discussed in the previous sections. The content of the questionnaire form was reviewed and pilot tested by selective groups of students. The survey samplings were designed to cover all four levels of the undergraduate business-program degree of BPU: freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors. As a part of the sampling process, four major-required courses were selected; each course was at each undergraduate level. The questionnaire forms were distributed in the classrooms of these four major required courses by the lecturers. There were a total of 408 returned questionnaires.

Data: Two aspects of students' attributes were concentrated and analysed here: (i) undergraduate levels and (ii) CGPA. The whole 408 respondents consist of 110 freshmen (27.0%), 57 sophomores (14.0%), 66 juniors (16.2%), 143 seniors (35.1%) and 31 over-seniors (7.6%). When analysed in the aspect of CGPA, the data consist of students: 15 with CGPA < 2.00 (3.7%), 112 with 2.01–2.50 (27.8%), 104 with 2.51–3.00 (25.8%), 90 with 3.01–3.50 (22.3%) and 82 with CGPA >3.50 (20.3%). Although the percentages of the respondents—in all the levels of the ungraduated year of study—were not equal, the percentages of the respondents—in the five levels of CGPA—turned out to be in similar percentages, except those with CGPA < 2.00.

4. Findings

The survey results were in three aspects: (1) Spaces and Places for Off-Campus ILS, (2) Reasons Why Off-Campus ILS are Used and (3) Reasons Why Off-Campus ILS are Not Used. The data on 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used' and 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used' were further analysed according to the two types of students' attributes: (a) CGPA and (b) undergraduate levels (in freshmen, sophomores, juniors and senior years).

4.1. Spaces and places for off-campus ILS

There were six spaces and places where students used as learning spaces outside the university campus. The top preference was 'Home/Dorm', with 50.93%, as shown in Figure 1.

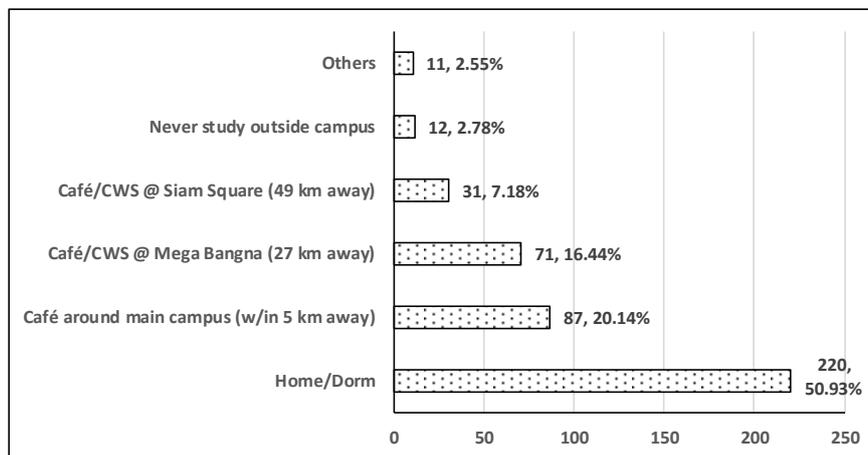


Figure 1. Spaces and places for off-campus ILS

The second preference was 'Cafés around the Main Campus', which are located within 5 kilometres around the university campus, with 20.14%. The third preference was 'Café and Coworking Spaces at Mega Bangna', with 16.44%. Mega Bangna is located 27 kilometres away from the campus. Mega Bangna is a super-regional mall with a total gross leasable area (GLA) of 191,216 square metres (Siam Future Development Plc, 2017). The fourth preference was 'Cafés and Coworking Spaces at Siam Square', with 7.18%. Siam Square is located 49 kilometres away from the campus. It is a shopping and entertainment area, located in the central business district of Bangkok. The Siam Square area is a

venue of many shopping arcades such as Siam Paragon (GLA = 300,000 sq.m) (Gilani, 2017), Siam Discovery, Siam Center, and MBK-Siam (GLA = 84,000 sq.m) (MBK, 2017; Hotel.com, n.d.). The fifth group was those who had never studied outside the campus, with 3.24%. The last group was the other choices from the respondents who studied in some other places, including friends' dorms and cafés/coworking spaces located in other areas of Bangkok, with 2.55%.

4.2. Reasons why off-campus ILS are used

There were several reasons why students study outside the university campus. The top three reasons were 'Capability to Eat and Drink' (19.10%), 'Feel Relaxed/Refresh' (15.32%) and 'Can Talk/Discuss' (12.79%), as seen in Figure 2. The other three reasons, with lower chosen percentages, were grouped as *Opening Time of ILS*, including 'Open 24/7', 'Open Late Hours' and 'Open Sat/Sun', with 10.27%, 9.01% and 6.76%, respectively. The total percentage of these three reasons relating to Opening Time was 26.04%. The two reasons, 'Can Talk/Discuss' and 'Social Interaction', were grouped and named as reasons relating to *Social Activities*, with a total of 18.29%. The rest of the reasons were about (a) *Distances From the Campus* ('Close to Home/Dorm' and 'Close to Main Campus'), with a total percentage of 8.83%; (b) *Atmospheres of Learning Spaces* ('Quiet' and 'Productive'), with a total of 8.65%; and (c) *Supporting Facilities* ('Enough Plug Socket'), with 3.24%.

The next step was to find whether students with different attributes have similar or different reasons 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used'. The data were further analysed according to two types of students' attributes: (a) CGPA and (b) undergraduate levels (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior and over-senior years).

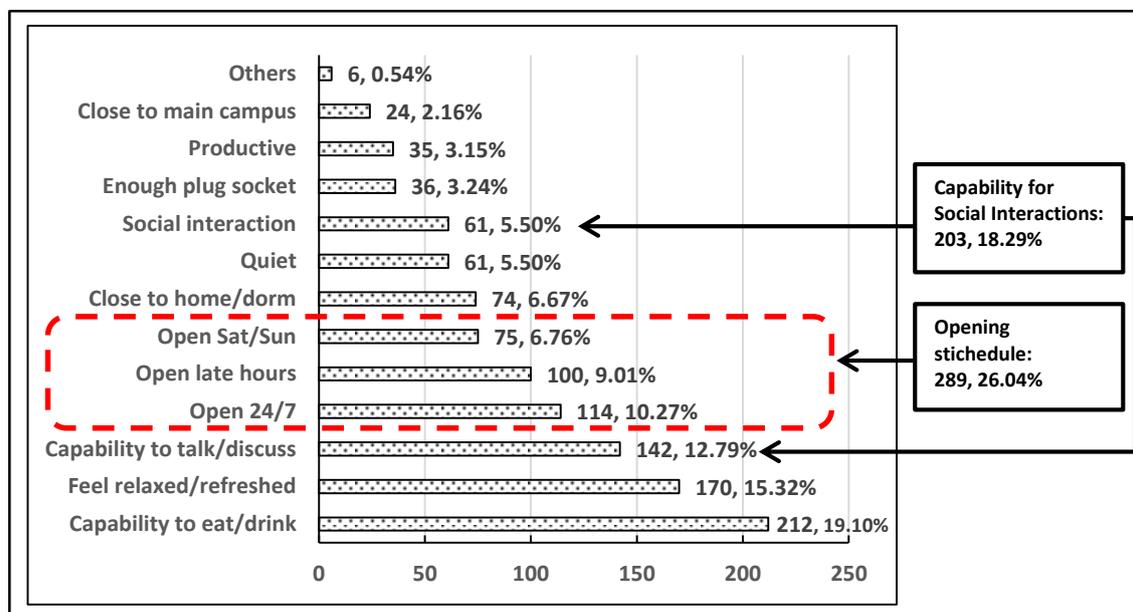


Figure 2. Reasons Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used

Analyses between Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used and CGPA: The data from the answer 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used' were grouped according to CGPA in five levels: students with CGPA below 2.00 (<2.00), CGPA of 2.00–2.50, CGPA of 2.51–3.00, CGPA of 3.01–3.50 and CGPA more than 3.50. Then, the data in each group were analysed by the descriptive data analysis. The results of the analysis were plotted in five line graphs, as shown in Figure 3. The rankings of the reasons 'Why Off-Campus Are Used' were still similar to those in Figure 2. Line graphs in Figure 3 show that students with any levels of CGPA had a similar proportion of reasons 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used'.

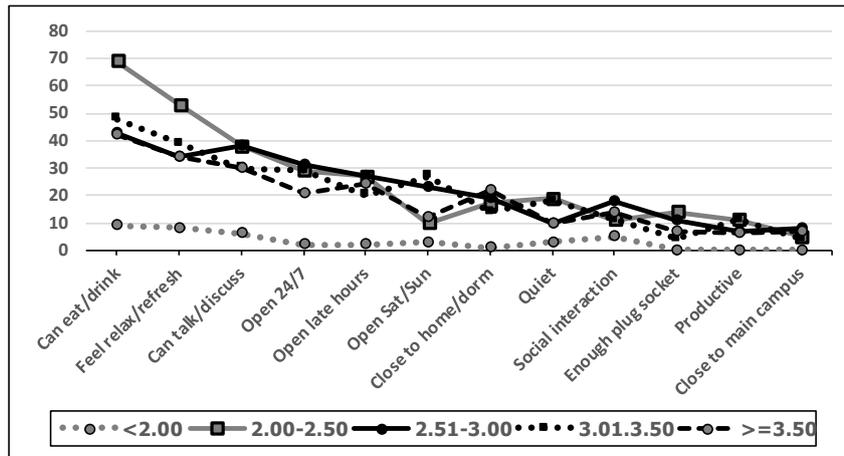


Figure 3. Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used, grouped by CGPA

Analyses between Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used and Undergraduate Levels: The data from the answer 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used' were grouped according to undergraduate levels in five groups: freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors and over-senior years. Next, the data at each level were descriptively analysed. The analysis results were plotted in five line graphs, as shown in Figure 4. The rankings of the reasons 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used' in all five line graphs were still similar to those in Figures 2 and 3. In Figure 4, the results show that students with any undergraduate levels also had a similar proportion of reasons 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used'.

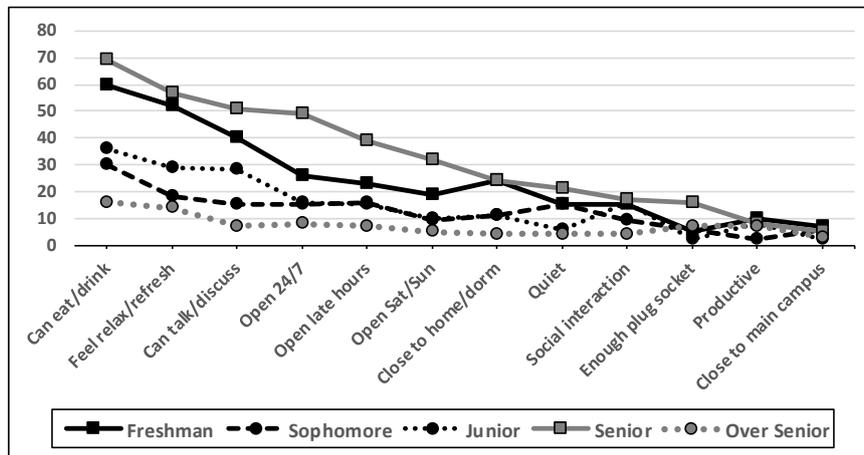


Figure 4. Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used, Grouped by Undergraduate Levels

4.3. Reasons Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used

There were several reasons why each of the respondents did not study outside the university campus, as shown in Figure 5. The topmost frequency reason was 'Cost Money' (23.79%). However, there were four factors relating to *Environment/Atmosphere* with the total of 40.47%, including 'Noisy/distraction' (20.09%), 'Impractical for studying' (8.15%), 'No Inspiration' (7.68%) and 'Uninspiring Design' (4.55%). The other reasons why students did NOT want to use off-campus ILS were about *location* and *study resources*: 'Inconvenient Location' (19.5%) and 'Study Resources not Available' (15.6%).

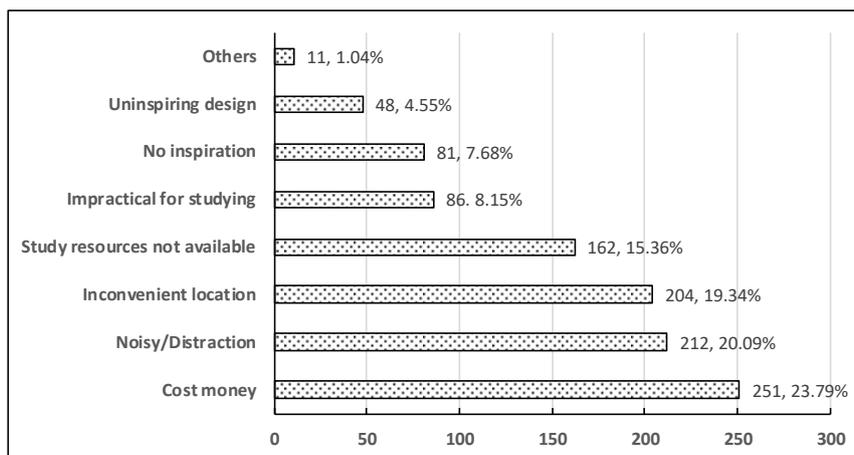


Figure 5. Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used

The next step was to find whether students with different attributes have similar or different reasons ‘Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used’. The data were further analysed according to the two types of students’ attributes: (a) CGPA and (b) undergraduate levels (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior and over-senior years).

Analyses between Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used and CGPA: The data from the answer ‘Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used’ were grouped according to CGPA in five levels, similar to those in Figure 3: students with CGPA below 2.00 (<2.00), CGPA of 2.00–2.50, CGPA of 2.51–3.00, CGPA of 3.01–3.50 and CGPA more than 3.50. Then, the data in each group were analysed by the descriptive analysis. The analysis results were plotted in five line graphs, as shown in Figure 6. The rankings of the reasons ‘Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used’ were also still similar to those in Figure 5. Line graphs in Figure 6 show that students with any levels of CGPA had similar proportions of reasons ‘Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used’.

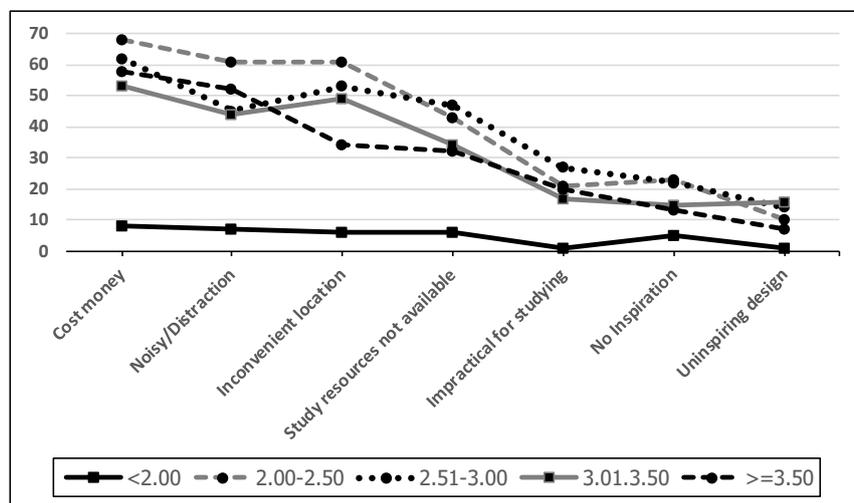


Figure 6. Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used, grouped by CGPA

Analyses between Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used and Undergraduate Levels: The data from the answer ‘Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used’ were then grouped according to undergraduate levels in five groups: freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors and over-seniors. Next, the data in each level were analysed by the descriptive data analysis. The analysis results were plotted in five line graphs, as

shown in Figure 7. The rankings of the reasons 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used' in all five line graphs were also still similar to those in Figures 5 and 6. The results in Figure 7 show that students with any undergraduate levels had similar proportions of reasons 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used'.

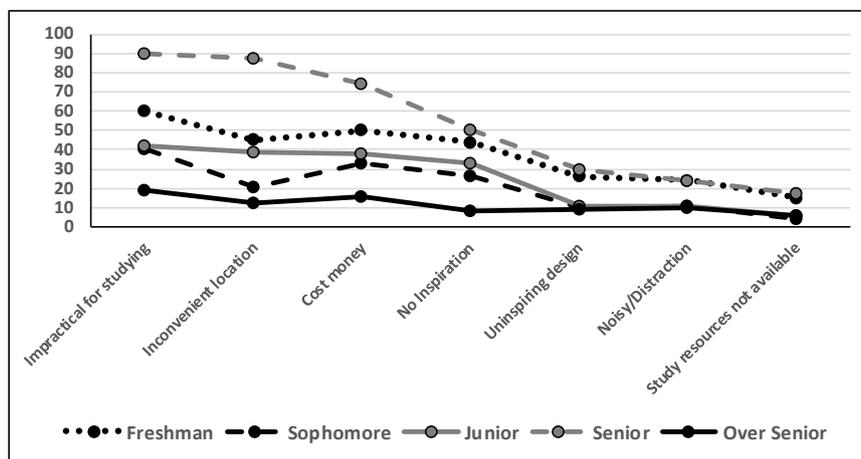


Figure 7. Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used, grouped by undergraduate levels

5. Discussions

The findings from the survey of where and *why off-campus ILS are used and not used*, in the abovementioned sections, reveal five interesting aspects as follows: (a) Places for Off-Campus ILS, (b) Characteristics of Preferred ILS, (c) Strengths and Weaknesses of On-Campus ILS, (d) CGPA and Undergraduate Levels and Reasons Why Off-Campus Are Used or Not-Used and (e) Long Commute for Preferred ILS.

5.1. Places for Off-Campus ILS

The majority of the respondents used several places to study off-campus. Only 2.78% of the respondents stated that they never studied outside the campus. This finding supports the previous research about the student using many places as ILS: home/dorm (Vanichvatana 2018a) and cafe/CWS (Hunter & Cox 2014; Vanichvatana 2018b). The total of 43.76% of the respondents used café/CWS as off-campus ILS.

5.2. Characteristics of Preferred Off-Campus ILS

The reasons why students chose to use off-campus ILS identify the characteristics of the top preferred off-campus ILS. These top preferred off-campus ILS are as follows: (1) places that students can eat/drink, (2) places that help them feel relaxed/refreshed, (3) places that allow social activities and (4) places that have flexible opening hours. This finding is similar to the findings of Vanichvatana (2018a). The preferences/positive-impressions of ILS were based on the environment rather than on facilities and equipment.

On the other hand, the top reasons why students did not choose to use off-campus ILS were about (1) location of off-campus ILS and (2) the availability of facilities/equipment. The lower reasons were about environment, such as uninspiring design. These results are similar to previous research findings (Harrop & Turpin, 2013; Vanichvatana, 2018a). The negative impressions about off-campus ILS are based on locations and facilities/equipment rather than on the environment.

5.3. Strengths and Weaknesses of On-Campus ILS

The reasons why students did not use off-campus ILS *reflect* the strengths of on-campus ILS. On the other hand, the reasons why students used off-campus ILS *reflect* the weaknesses of on-campus ILS. The following sections reveal the details of the strengths and weaknesses of on-campus ILS:

The strengths of on-campus ILS—when comparing to off-campus ILS—include: (1) it is free of charge, (2) there are proper learning environments and atmosphere, (3) it is convenient in terms of location—it is right there on the campus—and (4) it is usually equipped with free Wi-Fi/PC and supporting furniture.

The weaknesses of on-campus ILS—when compared to off-campus ILS—include: (1) on-campus ILS—such as libraries and other common areas—its opening hours are limited, not open late, not 24/7, not open on weekend, (2) on-campus ILS does not allow social activities, including discussion spaces and social interactions, (3) on-campus ILS – such as libraries—should allow food and drink. However, there is a caution about the improper handling of food debris and (4) on-campus ILS should provide enough comfortable furniture, such as comfortable chairs and flexible desks, and quality Wi-Fi, and plug sockets.

These findings are similar to the results of many past research about the characteristics of preferred ILS: places where eating and drinking are allowed (Vanichvatana, 2018a), places that are comfortable convenient (Harrop & Turpin, 2013; Vondracek, 2007), places that are convenient (Vanichvatana, 2018a) and places that are not comfortable (Harrop & Turpin, 2013).

5.4. CGPA and undergraduate levels

The analyses on 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Used' and 'Why Off-Campus ILS Are Not Used', with two students' attributes—CGPA and undergraduate levels, have similar proportions of reasons. That is to say: CGPA and undergraduate levels do contribute no differences for students to use off-campus ILS.

5.5. Long commute for preferred ILS

The majority of the respondents chose to study off-campus at Home/Dorm and Café around the campus—with the total percentages of 71.07%. However, there were 23.62% of the respondents who chose to commute very far away—27 kilometres (16.44%) to 49 kilometres (7.18%)—from the campus to study off-campus at their preferred ILS. This finding is very amazing and very interesting further research exploration.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This research initiated the study about where students used off-campus ILS and why they selected them. The study used the case of a BPU's business school students, employed quantitative research through descriptive statistics- questionnaire surveys. The findings achieved the research objectives: (a) the majority of the students used off-campus ILS, (b) many students willing to commute a long distance to their preferred ILS in CBD, (c) the reasons why students preferred off-campus ILS do reflect the strengths and weaknesses of on-campus ILS. The strengths include cost, environments and atmosphere, convenient location and supporting learning facilities. The weaknesses include the flexibility of opening hours, the capability of social interactions, the capability of eating and drinking, and discomfortability in some types of supporting furniture and technologies. The proportions of preferences for each off-campus ILS of students are similar, no matter what the levels of study performances (in terms of CGPA) and the academic year of the undergraduate levels are.

The study points out several concerns for the BPU and other HEI about the quality and services of on-campus ILS. Universities should increase and improve ILS to support students' informal learning

based on their preferences. On-campus ILS opening hours should be flexible, such as open late hours, open on weekend and open 24/7 during both regular and exam periods. Based on the possibility, several on-campus ILS should provide places that allow social activities: the capability to talk and discuss, and allow social interaction.

7. Limitations and further studies

The data for the research were from a case study of business school students at a Bangkok private university. The findings reveal students' preferences specifically to this case study. This research leads to future studies, including: (a) determining types of students' learning activities by using off-campus ILS, such as individual projects, assignments/homework, studying for quizzes/exams, term projects/team projects and group discussions and (b) the advantages of ILS in CBD over ILS around the campus—the reasons why students are interested to commute long distance for ILS in Bangkok CBD.

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