UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA
SRI LANKA

PROCEEDINGS

PERADENIYA UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH SESSIONS
(*i*PURSE 2014)

VOLUME 18

i PURSE

4th & 5th July 2014

Hosted by the Faculty of Science, University of Peradeniya

DIGITAL INFORMATION RESOURCE PREFERENCES OF UNDERGRADUATES: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THREE HEALTH SCIENCE FACULTIES OF UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

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Any comprehensive research covering the information seeking behaviour of the undergraduates of University of Peradeniya is not evident. To fill this gap, the researcher carried out a university-wide survey and this paper discusses the findings of one aspect with special reference to Faculties of Allied Health Science (FAHS), Dental Science (FDS) and Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science (FVAS). The objectives of this paper are 1) to present the trends of the use of Digital Information Resources (DIR) for academic activities by the undergraduates of the three faculties, 2) to analyze the factors affecting their DIR usage pattern, and 3) to make recommendations to improve their use of DIR. Of 818 undergraduates in the three faculties, 143 (2nd to 4th years) were surveyed with a response rate of 78%. Overall findings indicated that, Search Engines (SEs) are used by 62%, followed by Wikipedia (50%), Government Websites (15%), and full text databases available through the library (9%). However, there are variations across the faculties. SEs are used by 40% in FDS, by 72% in FAHS and by 79% in the FVAS. Wikipedia is used by 42%, 56% and 55% in the FDS, FAHS and FVAS respectively. Government websites are used by 7%, 20% and 21% in FDS, FAHS and FVAS. Full text databases are used by 2%, 16% and 12% in FDS, FAHS and FVAS. The most noticeable finding was the low use of databases (HINARI, a scholarly database relevant to the disciplines taught in these faculties), against the comparatively high usage of search engines and Wikipedia, in all faculties studied. Use of DIR is affected by several factors; 1) low level of access to computers, 3) absence of training, 3) lack of relevance of the available databases to the curricula, and 4) lack of motivation to access the scholarly information resources. Students per computer (SPC) in the FDS, FAHS and FVAS are respectively 42:1, 45:1 and 14:1 but 67%, 52% and 81% respectively use their own laptops/notebooks. Since HINARI is password controlled, higher SPC ratio cannot be a hindrance. HINARI is highly relevant to the curricula therefore irrelevance cannot be construed as a reason for low usage. However, training seems to be an issue. Almost half of the respondents (47%, 48% and 57% in FDS, FAHS and FVAS respectively) claimed that they need training in using Internet and the library. Previous international research have established that the absence/lack of training drives the students from databases to SEs and Wikipedia they are more user friendly for the naïve users. The low use of databases against the comparatively high use of SEs and Wikipedia in these faculties therefore, can be attributed to the lack of training in using DIR. However, further research is required to assess the motivation to access the scholarly DIR against SEs and Wikipedia. It is strongly recommended to offer training for the students of all academic years in using HINARI and other scholarly databases, without further delay so that their skills in searching and extracting information from scholarly databases are increased.