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The librarian as an information source and a mediator in supporting learning behavior of undergraduates: a case study at University of Peradeniya

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Introduction

It is a popular belief that the students depend mainly on electronic resources in the digital age and that they are quite conversant with using the technology-based information resources in their academic research. In the Sri Lankan context, more and more research is required to understand the information usage trends of the undergraduates. An initiative was taken by the principal researcher at University of Peradeniya to study the "Information seeking and research strategies of undergraduates in the digital age: a survey". This major study covered ten different aspects related to information resource usage and information-related research tasks and the main objective of the study was to raise awareness about the information seeking and research trends of the undergraduates of the university and to make recommendations to address the identified issues. This paper presents one aspect of this major study.

Objectives

Objectives of this paper are to 1) to present the use of librarians by the undergraduates as an information resource, 2) to present the use of librarians by the undergraduates to seek assistance in using information resources, 3) to analyse and interpret the findings based on the previously published research outcomes, and 4) to make recommendations to improve the use of librarians in their information search

Review of Literature

Due to word-length limitations, only one study is presented in detail here. Kuhlthau's (1994) work throws some significant light on the topic even after 20 years since its publication. In this work, Kuhlthau perceives the role of librarian in the information seeking process as interventions and asserts that, "the students' arrive at the library with different states of knowledge and at different points in the information search process. These states of knowledge and stages of process require a range of intervention" (Kuhlthau's 1994). Author further asserts that, these interventions can occur in five zones of the information seeking process ranging from one to five. "In zone 1 (Z1) the problem is self-diagnosed and a search is self-conducted. In zone 2 (Z2) through zone 5 (Z5) the problem is diagnosed through an interview to elicit a problem statement and background information. A problem statement or a request for information or a particular resource by the student usually initiates the interview" (Kuhlthau 1994) and the librarians can intervene at five different levels in mediation and education of students as Table 1 illustrates.

Table 1 – Levels of Mediation and Intervention by the Librarians

Zones of Intervention	Levels of mediation	Levels of education	Intervention
Z1	Organizer	Organizer	Self service
Z2	Locator	Lecturer	Single source
Z3	Identifier	Instructor	Group of sources
Z4	Advisor	Tutor	Sequence of sources
Z5	Counselor	Counselor	Process intervention

Source: Kuhlthau (1994)

As Kuhlthau perceives, Mediation can take place at different levels at the reference services; at level one as an organizer providing access to a collection of resources. At level two, as a locator of a single fact, or single source search is conducted in response to a specific query requiring a specific answer or source. The third level of mediation is the identifier, provides a subject search resulting in a list or group of relevant resources (without any particular order of use) to match a query. The fourth level of mediation occurs as an advisor, when a student presents the problem and a group of relevant resources is presented with recommendations on the order of use. The fifth level of mediation as a counselor occurs when a problem is identified through a dialogue and goes beyond a source orientation to address the constructive process of learning from a variety of sources.

Librarians can also intervene through bibliographic instruction at five levels of education corresponding to five zones. Of intervention; on level one, the organizer provides the organized collection for self-service use but offers no instructions. On level two, librarian as a lecturer provides orienting instruction, usually a single-session overview of services, policies, facility, and collection. Orientation is general and not addressed to a specific problem, question, or assignment, on level three, as an instructor, librarian responds by providing single-source, course-related instruction. A variety of independent sessions is offered to instruct on one type of source to address a specific problem related to a course assignment at point of need. On level four, as a tutor, a series of sessions are offered to instruct on the use of a group of sources and to recommend a sequence for using the sources to address a specific problem integrated with a course assignment. On level five as the counselor, provides instruction incorporating holistic interaction over time through guidance in identifying and interpreting information to address an evolving problem. The counselor merges the role of educator and mediator in ongoing process intervention (Kuhlthau 1994).

Methodology

Head and Eisenberg (2009a) carried out an online survey of information seeking behaviour of the undergraduates in the USA and this instrument was modified to suit the Sri Lankan context and administered as a printed questionnaire. This instrument was considered because, its content and construct validity of the instrument was already established by Head and Eisenberg (2009a and

2010) and many other countries were using this adopted version for country studies and a comparison of findings could be possible. Instead of online administration, distribution of printed version was considered because in the Sri Lankan context, the undergraduates are not much familiar with the online surveys and access to computers has an effect over the completion rate. To select the sample, Stratified Random Sampling method was used and the sample size was 10% of the second, third and fourth years. The total sample selected was 460 undergraduates to represent seven faculties (excluding Faculty of Medicine[5]). While the main instrument contained 20 questions, this paper is based on part of the findings of the questions on types of information they used and the people they consulted to seek assistance in evaluating information resources. Whenever necessary, data gathered in response to other questions were drawn in to support the findings.

Findings

The overall response rate was 79% (363 students) and the findings of the survey indicated that, only 25% of the undergraduates use the librarians as an information resource while only 20% seek assistance from them in using information resources. There are variations across the disciplines. The highest percentage of respondents (38%) use the librarians as an information resource and to seek assistance (27%) in the health sciences[6], while the lowest percentage (13%) use the librarians as an information resources in the Arts and 8% of the undergraduates using them to seek information in science (Table 2 and Figure 1).

Table 2 – Use of Librarians by the undergraduates in support of their research

Discipline	Use of Librarians as an Information Resource	%	Use of Librarians to seek assistance in using information resources	%
Arts	14	13	21	20
Agriculture	14	21	7	10
Engineering	34	33	26	25
Health Sciences	43	38	18	27
Science	11	17	2	8
Total	**90**	**25**	**74**	**20**

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[5] Faculty of Medicine was excluded from the survey as the number of responses received were not adequate
[6] Health Science in this paper includes the Faculties of Allied Health Science, Dental Science and Veterinary and Animal Science.
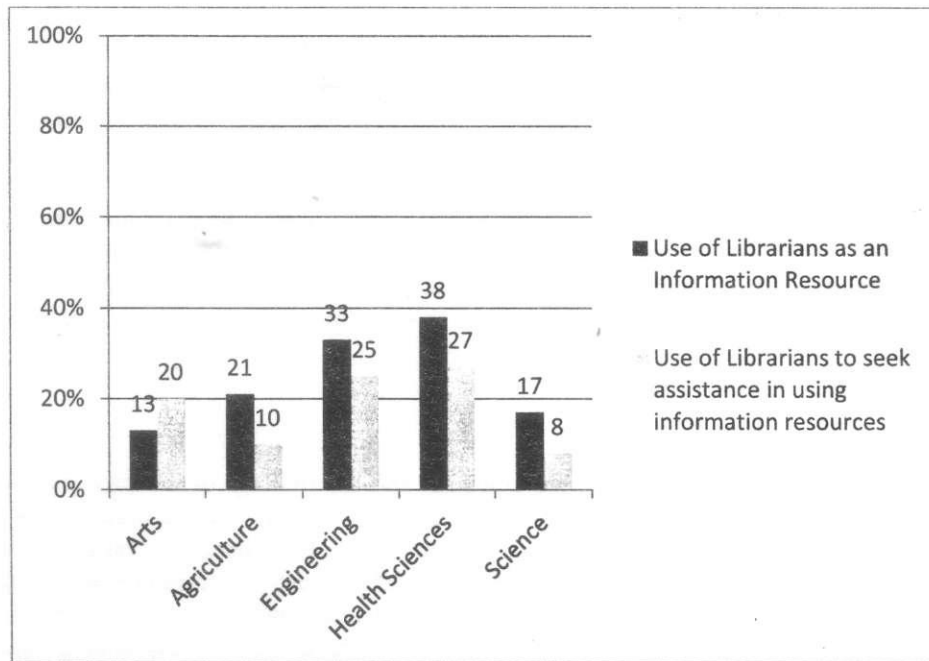
Figure 1 – Use of Librarians by the undergraduates in support of their research

Discussion

The overall figures of approaching the librarians either as an information resource or to seek assistance with their information seeking, by the undergraduates is rather low. Further in-depth study is necessary to identify the exact reasons for this trend and to explain why health science undergraduates approach the librarians more than the undergraduates in other disciplines approach the librarians. However, other global research has proved that this trend is not specific to Sri Lanka. Callinan (2005), made a comparative study of the information seeking behaviour of the first and final year biology students in University College of Dublin, Ireland. The study established that, they received orientation tours, 25% and 22% respectively by the first and final years. Of the respondents, 7% and 18% respectively received course-related instructions from the library while 29% and 55% respectively received individual assistance at the reference desk. Printed instructions were received by 28% and 32% but 0% of both groups had individual appointments with a librarian. However, 67% and 96% of the first and final years have received help from friends and colleagues. These findings confirm that the use of librarians by the respondents is minimal. Head and Eisenberg (2009a), studying over 8000 students in the USA, commented that the use of librarians by their respondents was low; "Few students (20%) in our sample consulted librarians about research assignments (e.g., developing a research strategy) or about the campus library system (24%) (e.g., finding out about available resources on campus). Of their respondents, 80% has reported that they did not use librarians for help with a course-related research assignment and 76% has reported that they rarely, if ever, asked a librarian about the workings of the campus library system. In a related question about respondents perceived helpfulness of library services, 31% has reported that consulting a librarian about an assignment proved helpful in their course-related research. As a whole, the results suggest students do, in fact, use libraries—but most of the respondents used library resources—not librarian-related services" (Head and Eisenberg 2009a, p.23). They suggest that there was a strong "student-librarian disconnect" occurring among students in their sample. Cheunwattana...et. al. (2012),

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who used the same survey instrument as the current study also echoed this trend and confirmed that librarians are not approached as a key information resource by the undergraduates in the six universities they surveyed in Thailand. The percentages of respondents who reported that they *almost always, often* and *sometimes* consulted librarians are 13.03%, 12.12%, and 23.34% respectively. These authors do not record at all, the use of librarians by the undergraduates to seek assistance in using information resources.

Head and Eisenberg (2009b) asserts that "Many participants considered formal library instruction (one-time, individual class visits) of little value to them, too. Throughout our sessions, participants reported that "library talks" (i.e.,bibliographic instruction) made sense at the time, but that it was hard to recall and apply months later, when students were working on a research assignment. Other participants reported that they infrequently consulted librarians with the search terms they entered into scholarly research databases. Students told us "we are just as capable to enter basic search terms as librarians can," "that I've been able to get by, so far, without librarians," and "I don't need a tour of the library, I just need to find one thing...now." One student said, "my first step used to be the library, but it was too much information, now I just go to the Web." We found, generally, that when students did not receive (or request) the service they value delivered at the moment they need it from librarians, they quickly change course. Participants found a solution on their own, which is usually found online and derived from self-taught techniques that help them find the context they need. (Head and Eisenberg 2009b, p. 11)

Conclusion

Findings established that only 25% use librarians as an information resource and only 20% use librarians to seek assistance in using information resources. The figures are much lower than the usage of their lecturers or classmates. In the light of Kuhlthau's (1994) classification, librarians only mediate at zone one and level one as organizers for self service and educate at zone one and level one in providing general orientation programmes. There is a wide scope remaining for the librarians to intervene as identifiers, instructors, advisors, tutors and counselors.

This current survey only exposed the quantitative findings related to the role of librarians in the information seeking behaviour of undergraduates. Further qualitative in-depth research is required to isolate the reasons for the low usage of librarians by the students in their information seeking process and to identify the barriers for librarians to widen their scope in intervening in the students' information seeking process. Although the use of librarians has been proved low in several other international studies, it is not an issue to be ignored. Serious attention of the librarians is essential to understand why fewer students turn to them for support and to make use of their expertise in guiding the students for more effective use of information resources in their academic research.

Recommendations

It is recommended to undertake further qualitative research to establish why the librarians are used less than the lecturers and even classmates by the undergraduates in their information seeking process. It is also recommended, for the librarians to re-visit the library instruction and reference services provided for the students along with mediation and education as identified by Kuhlthau (1994) and provide more appropriate intervention through formal information literacy programmes.

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