ACCESS TO INFORMATION: EXPERIENCE OF UNDERGRADUATES FROM TWO UNIVERSITIES OF SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to investigate perceptionsof accessing information byundergraduate students of the Department of Islamic Studies of the University of Peradeniya and South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.Cross sectional survey design was employed in the study. Structured questionnaires were administered among all students of the Department of Islamic Studies of the two departments.Four hundred and thirty nine duly completed questionnaires wereselected and analyzed using descriptivestatistical tools. It is found that the first year and second year students of the University of Peradeniya have experienced major difficulties in language to access information.Among the first year undergraduates, 78% admitted that they could not access information properly due to communication difficulties. Barriers in communication with the staff and technical issues are experienced by 61% of the undergraduates.Apart from the above difficulties, cultural differences appear to be a major barrier in accessing information.Undergraduates from South Eastern University have experienced no difficulty in communication. Only 43% of the University of Peradeniya and 41% of South Eastern University undergraduates are aware of Electronic Resources available in the library. Among the total respondents, 82% of the total population prefer to access information through printed materials.It can be concludedthat majority of the selected students from the University of Peradeniya find difficulties in accessing information due to language barriers, technical issues and cultural differences. Also, the study leads to the conclusion that undergraduates from both universities show less awareness of accessing information through Electronic Information Resources available in the library. On the basis of the findings of the study,providing more training, assisting in their library searches and employing more Tamil speaking employers to foster maximum interaction with ethnically diverse undergraduates in the library is recommended. Payingmore insight to requirements of ethnically diverse undergraduate students in designing library orientation programmes is also strongly suggested.The study provides direction to further research on the theme in qualitative manner to understand the phenomenon in-depth and in detail.

Keywords: Access to information, Undergraduates, Islamic Studies, University, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka being a multi ethnic country provide equal education opportunities to its population. Students enrolled in universities come from various economical and cultural backgrounds. Minority students, who enroll in Sri Lankan universities come primarily from non-Sinhala or English speaking backgrounds and also   English/Sinhala is neither medium of instruction in their schools. As a result many minority students needs to make major adjustments after enrolling in universities, where the language and culture is different from their locality.

This paper presents a preliminary investigation of perception of undergraduate students of two universities in Sri Lanka. University of Peradeniya (UoP), one of the settings of present study issituatedin Kandy, Central Province of Sri Lanka, where the Sinhala is the language of majority of population. UoP is the largest and oldest university in Sri Lanka. It has over 12000 undergraduate students in 94 academic units (constituent postgraduate institutes, academic departments, centres, units and libraries. (University of Peradeniya, 2014). UoP accommodates greater numbers of students from diverse backgrounds. Accordingly, Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, Indian Tamil and number of foreign students are of the privilege to take the shade under its shelter. However, by ethnicity Sinhala students are the majority in the university. While English is affluently use in the university in teaching and learning, Sinhala is also used abundantly being the language of majority in the area. University of Peradeniya Library Network (UoPLN) consists of 8 libraries, that provide access to wealth of resources exceeding 900000 materials (Dehigama, 2014)ranging from books to palm leaf manuscripts, copper plate inscriptions, paintings, masks, microfilms, Gramophone records andmaps etc. Library card catalogue, online public access catalogue, digitization project and EIRs provide access to wealth of information to its user universe (Dehigama&Dharmaratne, 2015). Effective access to information is encouraged by offeringlibrary orientation programmes, workshops and seminars. Library orientation programmes are conducted in Sinhales, Tamil and English languages.

South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL), situated in Ampara, was established in 1995. The locale of the university is much different from University of Peradeniya, by the nature of the university, academic disciplines serve and by the ethnicity of students admitted to the university. Accordingly, the university is located in an area where Tamil is the language of majority. Mainstream students and university employees are also speak Tamil language mostly. Tamil

speaking Students exceed the number of students of other ethnicities. The library of the university is more than 115000materials, where the majority of employees are also Tamil and Muslim by ethnicity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role of academic libraries in university life is vital as they are essential to accomplish the mission and goals of universities in any country. According to Kuh and Gonyea (2003) "the library is the physical manifestation of the core values and activities of academic life […] the library's central role in the academic community is unquestioned." Academic libraries are also responsible to demonstrate their value to the affiliated institution. Therefore, academic libraries are ofincreased accountability for student achievements and research output of the academic staff of the university. To demonstrate the value and effectiveness of the library, its   resources should be optimally used by users. Education and skills lead to the effective utilization of library materials. Publicizing of library services are vital for better visibility and user education is important for wider accessibility and effective utilization of information. Information literate users are feeling comfortable with information tools, use most appropriate sources of information. Better information literacy in libraries is much appreciated as relationship between library use and academic success of university and college students are widely proven throughout decades. For example Barkey, (1965),Mallinckrodt&Sedlacek, 1985; DeJager (1997) , Rushing& Poole,(2002); Wong and Webb, (2011) discovered the association between grade point averages and number of checked out books. Impact on library use on student retention has also studied by several researchers. One such study carried out by Mallinckrodt and Sedlacek, 1985 on the students of University of Maryland revealed that use of the library is an important factor of student retention.A recent study on the impact of library usage on the retention and academic success by Soria, Fransen&Nackerud (2013) demonstrate library users demonstrate higher retention rate and academic achievements than non-users.

On the other hand, several studies have been undertaken regarding the library usage by undergraduate students and their perception about the library(Tajafari, 2014; Wu & Chen, 2012;Okela-Obura, 2010). In such study, Kumar and Amsaveni, (2015) discuss the problems encounteredby students of Aided minority Christian autonomous degree colleges of Bengaluru. Findings include, lack of current and latest information, faced by students in the library restricted

library hours and lack of support from the library staff. While several studies are available on the association between library use, academic performance and retention rates of students and students' perception about the library of various educational levels, there has been a dearth of research examining the academic library experience of minority students.

Probe into literature uncovered few previousstudies, two of which are related but not very similar to the selected theme. For example Onwuegbuzieand Jiao's study of native and non-native English speaking students (1997), it is investigated how often students usetheir library and why. Also it is studied which group of students had the highest levels of library anxiety. The study provides overwhelming evidence that non-native English-speaking students use the library for variety of reasons such as study for a test, to find information and study for a class project, and read textbooks. In addition they use and visit the library more frequently. According to the study non-native English speaking students demonstrated higher level of library anxiety that is associated with staff of the library, communication difficulties, and mechanical barriers.

MacAdam and Nichols (1989)study deals with a peer information support programme carried out by the library that is targeted to University of Michigan minority students with a view to assist them to improve their library information and computer skills. One of the goals of the study was to contribute to a campus atmospherewhich promotes retention of minority undergraduates.In their research it is discussed the factors that contribute to academic difficulties experienced by minority students of white, middle class colleges and universities that include prior scholastic preparation, separation from familiar surroundings and difficulty to adjust the new social environment. Exploring of available literature demonstrate that there is no study confined to study the experience of minority students in accessing library information. Hence, this study is carried out the fill the lacuna.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The motivation behind this study was to examine the perceptions of accessing information by undergraduate students of the Departments of Islamic Studies, University of Peradeniya and South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. The study aimed at understanding the key issues which act as barriers in bridging the information divide among university undergraduates. Students selected are

from two departments of Islamic students in two universities that differ in size, nature and setting as delineated above in the introduction.

METHODOLOGY

Undergraduates of the Departments of Islamic Studies of University of Peradeniya and South Eastern University of Sri Lanka represented the targetpopulation for this study. In order to achieve research objectives outlinedabove cross sectional survey was employed in the study.The questionnaire was constructed based on the following elements; language and communication difficulties, cultural differences, awareness of EIR, preferable media of access to information, technological issues, knowledge about search techniques.Structured questionnaires were administered amongthe total student universe (608) of two departmentsquestionnaires were considered as the most appropriate instrument tocollect data from students since interviews are difficult to arrange due to timeconstraints of students. 439 duly completed questionnaires wereselected and analyzed using descriptivestatistical tools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

 A total of 521 questionnaires were administered among the students of two departments. 479 completed questionnaires were received from both departments. 95 questionnaires were received from UoPwhile 384 questionnaires were received from SEU. Accordingly, out of the 422 questionnaires distributedin SEU 384 received representing 90% response rate. In UOP out of 99questionnaires administered 95 received representing 95% response rate. 29and 11 questionnaires were rejected respectively from SEU and UoP due toincompletion. Accordingly 439 duly completed questionnaires were selected for the study.
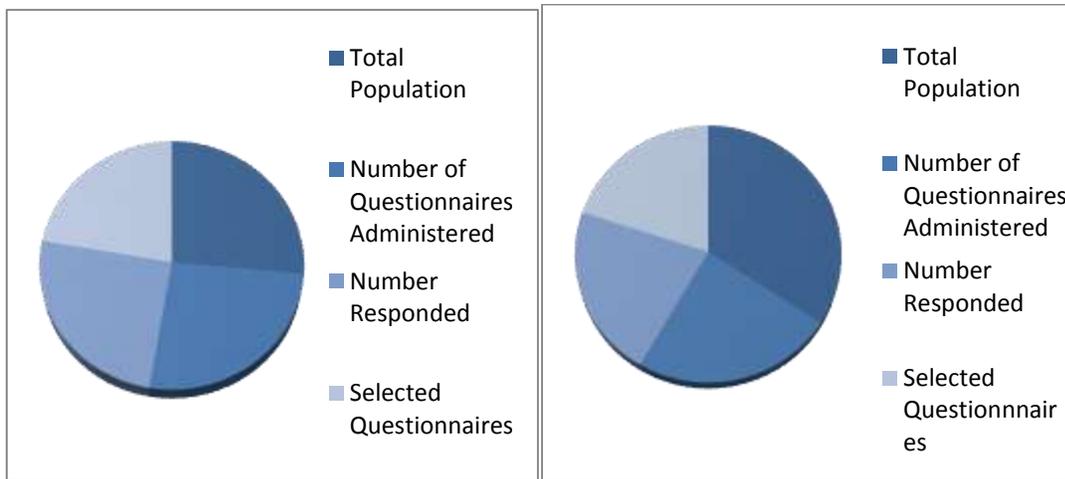
Figure 1-UoP-User Responses Figure 2-SEU User Responses

Findings of the study indicated that first year and second year students of the University of Peradeniya have experienced language as the major difficultyin accessing information available in the library.Among the first year undergraduates, 78% admit they could not access to information properly due to communication difficulties (See figure 3). Barriers in communication with the staff are experienced by 61% of total population of UoP. However, third year and final year students clearly displayed that they have overcome the language as well as communication barriers. Because, only 8% of third year and none of the final year undergraduates fromUoP indicated that they are still having communication difficulties, when attempting to access information available in the library. However, undergraduates from SEU have not demonstrated apparent difficulty in accessing information in terms of communication skills. The finding established that undergraduates face difficulties in adjusting to new environment where the widely used language for education and everyday life is different from their mother tongue. Wayman (1984) discusses communication as the biggest barrier that encounter in library usage. Students with communication difficulties avoid ask questions Natowitz (1995) and they are inclined to ask questions from their friends to clarify the matters arising in using the library instead of clarifying from the library staff.

Apart from above difficulties, undergraduate students of UoP are of the perception that cultural differences as a major barrier in accessing information. 80% of the first year UoP students are of
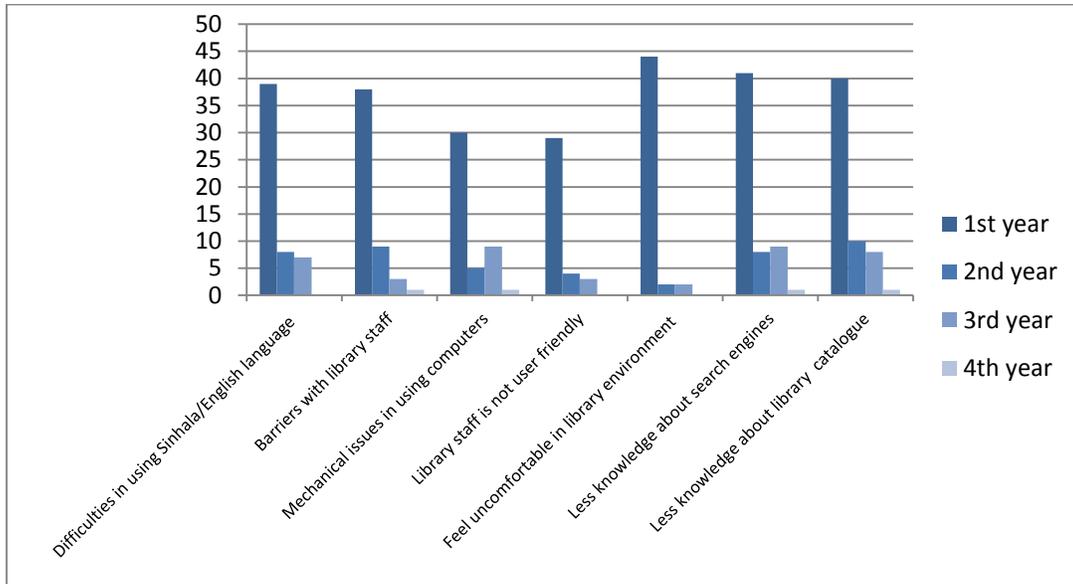
Figure 3.

Experience about accessing information UoP

the opinion that their accent of using English/Sinhala languages is much different from the local students. Therefore, they are reluctant to use English/Sinhala language in public, although they are fairly proficient in   languages. Also they find the UoP library is much different from the libraries they have ever visited, in size, nature of the collection and staff employed.First year students indicated that they could not concentrate during the library orientation programme due to it is limited to very short span of time and they were still new to the environment. Study demonstrates that anxiety is coupled with uncertainty about if the behavior is appropriate in the library prevails among first year students. Therefore, students prevent from asking questions.However, Figure 3 clearly depicts that challenges in accessing information is gradually diminished as students reach 3rd and 4th year of their study.

Figure 4 shows that different outcomes from the undergraduates students of SEU in terms of accessing information in the SEU library. Since two major languages used in SEU is Tamil and English, the first variable in the questionnaire distributed to SEU is replaced as Tamil instead of Sinhala language. It is discovered that there is zero number of students face difficulties in using Tamil/English languages in the library.
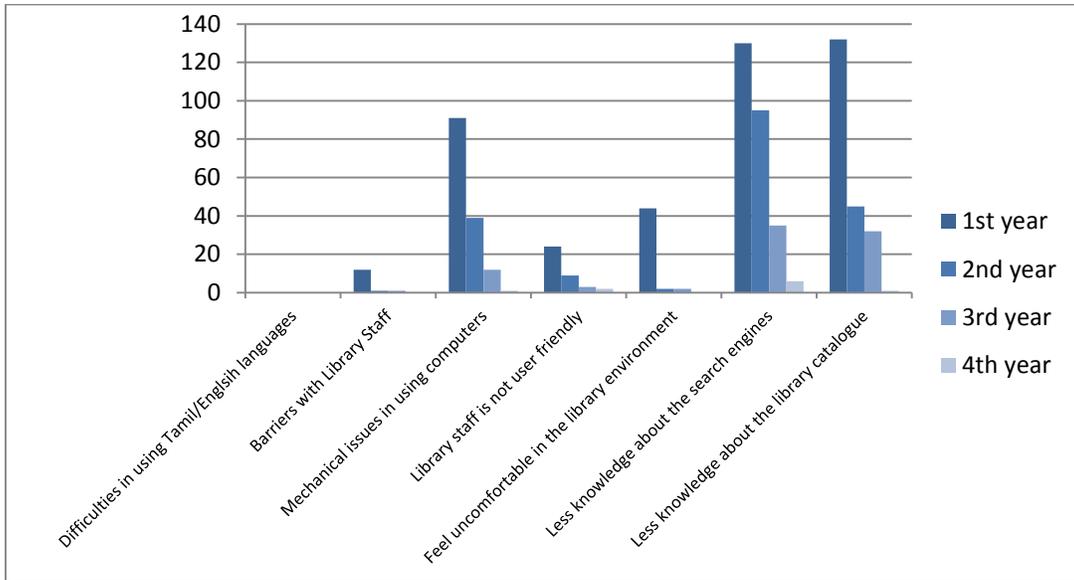
Figure 4

Experience about accessing information- SEU

While there is drastic difference about the experienced communication barriers in accessing information in two universities, students show similar results on the awareness about the Electronic Information Resources (EIR) available in two libraries.Accordingly 43% of University of Peradeniya and 41% South Eastern University undergraduates are aware of EIR available in the library (Figure 5). Among the total respondents 82% of the total population prefer to access information through printed materials (Figure 6).
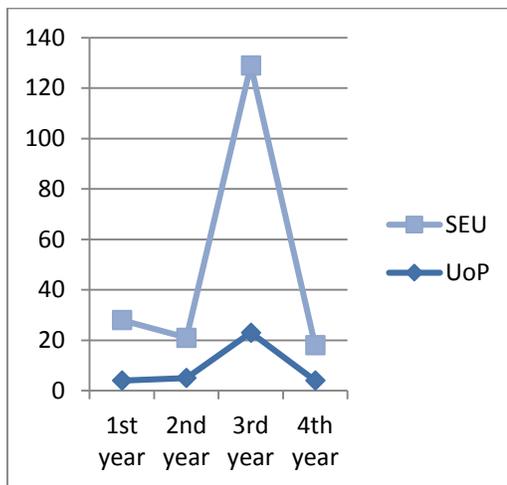

Figure 5
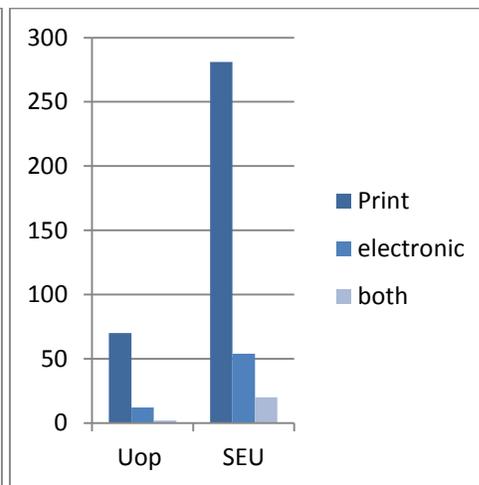
Awareness of EIR

Figure 6

Preferred FormatAccessing Information

Results further indicated that knowledge about the search engines and library catalogue and mechanical barriers they are faced with students are comparatively similar in two universities (Figure3).

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that majority of the first year students of the selected Department of University of Peradneiya find difficulties in accessing information due to language barriers as well as communication barriers, , feeling uncomfortable in the library environment, barriers with library staff, mechanical issues in using computers, less knowledge about the library catalogue and search engines. Although librarians are not expected to teach English in the library, assistance should be provided to these students in library searchprocess, use of periodicals and on-line and printed catalogues. Library staff should be employed to closely monitor the use of library computers especially by the minority students. Study discovered veryfew of first year students, 8 % and 12 % respectively from UoP and SEU are aware about EIRs. Also, the study based overall results, lead to the conclusion that undergraduates from the both universities show low awareness of the accessing information through EIRs available in the library. On the basis of findings of the study, providing more training, assisting in their library searches and employing more Tamil speaking employers to help, foster maximum interaction with ethnically diverse undergraduates when they are in the UoPlibrary is recommended. Paying more insight to requirements of ethnically diverse undergraduate students in designing library orientation programmes is also strongly suggested. The study provides direction to further research on the theme in qualitative manner to understand the picture in-depth and detail. Also future research on the relationship between academic achievements and usage of library of minority students will provide significant details to librarians in order to shape up focused group library orientation programmes and workshops.

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