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**Evaluation of library material by the undergraduates:
a case study at University of Peradeniya**

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Introduction

The principal researcher undertook a research project titled "Information seeking and research strategies of undergraduates in the digital age: a survey" and the research problem involved the systematic study of the current position of the information seeking and research strategies of the undergraduate of University of Peradeniya with a view to discover the trends, and issues encountered by the undergraduates. 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 1) to present the criteria used by the undergraduates to evaluate the library material, 2) to analyse and interpret these criteria based on the previously published research outcomes, and 3) to make recommendations to improve their evaluation behaviour.

Review of related literature

Currie et al. (2009) examined undergraduate students' information-seeking behavior and established that the students used several criteria to evaluate information resources for their research papers. The criteria used by them are the balance, content, scholarly nature, currency, credibility of the source and references. Accessibility and convenience were also mentioned as important criteria in selecting sources. The study concluded that, even though the students understood the need to select credible sources and used certain criteria to determine validity or relevance, they are not skilled in the application of these evaluation criteria effectively. A qualitative study carried out by Twait (2005) ascertained that the undergraduates rely on content, relevance, and familiarity when making resource selection decisions. Credibility, convenience, and format/type were also frequently mentioned criteria by the students in this study. It also determined that the students' year in school influenced their selection criteria and format preference. Scoyoc and Cason (2006) determined in their study that the undergraduates relied primarily on the internet sites and online instruction modules for their research needs rather than university-funded research sources. Martin (2008) investigated the information seeking skills of undergraduate majors to examine the types of sources they used for their research and to determine if library instruction had any impact on the types of sources used. The study also sought to determine whether an association existed between library instruction sessions and the types of sources used. The results proved that the majority of students surveyed, find their research information from the Internet, even though they admit that library resources are more

credible. Kim and Sin (2007) identified several factors associated with undergraduate information source selection, such as accessibility, ease of use, comprehensiveness, and efficiency. Their study revealed that the most important criteria in resource selection were accuracy and trustworthiness. Similarly, Lee et al. (2008) found that accuracy, currency, accessibility and reliability were considered most important when researchers search for information. Xie and Joo (2009) identified seventeen reasons related to information source selection in analysing sixty information-seeking episodes of 31 participants: accessibility, ease of use, comprehensiveness, interactivity, useful results, task type, familiarity with source, and many others, were identified. In addition, they confirmed that the document format also acts as a factor influencing resource selection.

Methodology

An online survey instrument used by Head and Eisenberg (2009) was revised to suit the Sri Lankan context and was administered as a printed questionnaire. This instrument was considered because of its open availability, and its content and construct validity has already been established by the authors. Stratified Random Sampling method was used to select the respondents from seven faculties, Sample size was 10% of the second, third and fourth years, and the total sample was 460 undergraduates.

Twenty questions relating to the personal data, type of information resources they used and the frequency, criteria used to evaluate the resources, people they consulted for help with evaluations, their research practices, use of productivity tools, objectives of doing a course-related research paper, and difficulty of research related information tasks were also studied. Places where they access computers, the training they received in using the libraries and Internet were also studied. This paper specifically discusses the criteria used by the respondents to evaluate the library material. The "Library Material", within this paper means the general collection available in the faculty libraries for the use of the undergraduates.

Ten criteria were listed and the respondents were asked to mark the frequency of their usage of each criterion, to evaluate the library material. Seven Likert type options were given for them to mark and the response categories "Used Almost Always and Used Often" were conflated for the discussions of the findings.

Findings

The overall response rate of the study was 79% (363 students), of which, 56% were female and 44% were male, while 55% was 21-23 years old and 39% was 24-26 years. Of the respondents, 39% has obtained a GPA² of 3.0-3.5 and 20% has obtained 3.6 or above in their previous academic year, which denotes satisfactory academic performance of the respondents. Table 1 depicts the usage of library material by the respondents according to their disciplines and as a whole.

² Grade Point Average

Table 1 – Use of library material by the undergraduates

Discipline	Library Collection	%
Agriculture	30	45
Arts	88	85
Engineering	48	47
Health Sc.	40	61
Science	12	50
Total	218	60

Findings established that 60% of the undergraduates use the library material, with variations across the faculties. As indicated in Table 1, highest percentage of Arts undergraduates (85%) use the library material, while the lowest percentage is recorded from Agriculture (45%). Detailed findings (Figure 1 and Table 2) indicate that a maximum of 70% of the respondents evaluate the library material while 30% have not made any comments about the criteria they use to evaluate the library material. Since the material added to the library are evaluated before purchasing or accessioning (in the case of gifts), by the librarians as well as faculty members, not considering any of the evaluation criteria is not as harmful as not evaluating the Internet-based resources. However, it is significant for the undergraduates to develop their skills in evaluating information resources because it is important for them to select the appropriate from the considerably large collections available in the library.

The study ascertained that the majority of the respondents (70%) uses currency of the material while 54% have stated that they consider whether they have heard of the book or article before, and 53% have indicated that the evaluation criteria they use is whether the vital information they require is contained in the charts [and illustrations] of the material. The traditional standards like the author's credentials (36%), publisher's reputation (39%) and recommendation of the librarians (21%) are not given priority by the undergraduates.

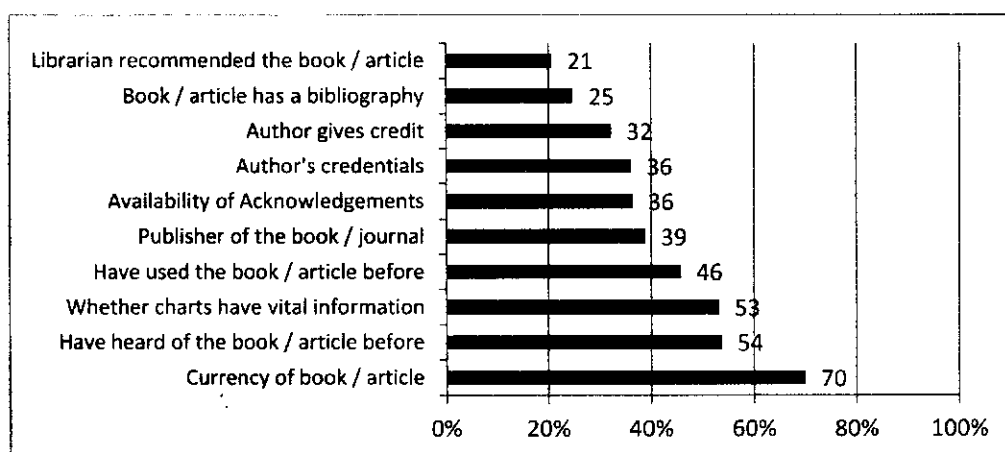


Figure 1 – Criteria used by undergraduates to evaluate the library material

Findings proved that there are discipline-wise variations in evaluating the library material (Table 2). The highest recorded percentage of the respondents evaluating the library material is 59% in Agriculture. Currency of the book / article and whether the vital information they require are contained in the charts [and illustrations] of the material (59%) and whether they have heard of the material (45%) are the criteria used by the majority. Arts, records the highest percentage (84%) of evaluating library material by the respondents and they too give currency of the material, priority while the availability of vital information in the charts is considered secondly. In the Engineering, 59% of the respondents consider currency while having heard about the material is used by 51%. Respondents from the Health Sciences also use currency (71%) and whether they have heard of the material (65%). In the Science discipline, 79% use currency while 65% consider whether they have used or used the material before. These findings indicate that across the disciplines also there is not much of a difference in the criteria used to evaluate the library material. Currency and the previous exposure to the material seem to be the most popular criteria followed by the availability of the vital information in charts and illustrations.

Table 2 – Criteria used by undergraduates to evaluate the library material

Evaluation Criteria	Agri.	Arts	Eng.	Health Sc.	Science	Total %
1. Currency of the book / article	59	84	59	71	79	70
2. Author's credentials	25	44	34	39	29	36
3. Availability of Acknowledgements	32	49	31	29	33	36
4. Author gives credit	20	45	27	33	25	32
5. Book / article has a bibliography	16	47	16	17	13	25
6. Whether charts have vital information	59	57	47	53	42	53
7. Publisher of the book / journal	38	53	30	36	21	39
8. Librarian recommended the book / article	16	17	25	24	21	21
9. Have used the book / article before	38	37	45	62	63	46
10. Have heard of the book / article before	45	52	51	65	63	54

Discussion

Head and Eisenberg (2010) have identified three criteria for evaluating information resources;

- Traditional standards of timeliness and authority (use of publication date, credentials of the author, meaning of the URL and librarians recommendations),
- Domain specific standards (reliability, authority, and credibility of the content).
- Self-taught standards (methods acquired from friends, classmates or other informal contacts). According to the authors, these criteria tend to be personal and qualitative.

According to this classification, the often-used criterion by the respondents (currency) is a traditional standard but the other criteria (previous exposure to the material) indicate that they remain within a comfort zone and do not use other traditional or domain specific standards

adequately. It also proved that they use self-taught personal and qualitative standards instead of reliable methods.

Cheunwattana ...et.al (2012), in their study of undergraduates in six Thai universities, carried out using the same survey instrument, ascertained that 39.39% often considered the currency of the material, 36.07% considered the credentials of the author, 35.76% considered whether the content acknowledges different viewpoints and 33.74% considered whether the charts contain vital information they need, in evaluating library material. The comparison indicates that a higher percentage of Sri Lankan undergraduates evaluate the library material than their Thai counterparts, but qualitatively Thai undergraduates use more standard criteria rather than self-taught methods used by the Sri Lankan undergraduates.

Although the library material is pre-evaluated by the faculty and the library staff, there is evidence that the undergraduates have problems in selecting library material for their academic work. The major study which inquired about the difficulties of information related research tasks determined that for 53% of the undergraduates finding up-to-date material is difficult, for 48%, sorting through the irrelevant material to find the appropriate is difficult and for 47% evaluating the information sources is difficult.

It can be construed, that these difficulties are caused by the lack of skills in evaluating information resources. The findings of the major survey further established that the undergraduates do not receive adequate training in using the library. In response to the training they received to use the library / Internet, 52% commented that they did not receive any such training and 57% commented that they would like the library to offer such training. Discussions with the faculty librarians proved that in most faculties, undergraduates receive only an orientation programme when they are first admitted to the faculty, but no other training is offered to guide them in using the information resources because any time cannot be devoted for library training within their curricula.

Conclusion

The findings of this study yield some insights into the strategies guiding undergraduates to choose better information resources in their academic works. The results showed that the undergraduates used self-taught methods instead of using more traditional and accepted standards due to their lack of skills and awareness. It is vital to enhance their evaluating skills, so that they develop competency in selecting the most appropriate material to suit their research needs.

Recommendations

It is strongly recommended to provide adequate training programmes for undergraduates in evaluating library material. If the busy schedules of the undergraduates do not enable, conducting face-to-face training sessions, librarians need to consider offering these guidance through alternative methods like printed brochures and web-based tutorials. The authors further recommend that academic librarians work to establish stronger partnerships with teaching faculty to ensure that research and information literacy skills are integrated into the curricula. A closer collaboration between teaching faculty and librarians could result in greater student understanding of the academic research process and contribute to student success and retention.

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