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Peer assisted research culture of the undergraduates: a case study at University of Peradeniya

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Introduction

In the digital age, the undergraduates have the opportunity of using a wide variety of human, printed and digital information resources and at the same time, they can encounter many issues when they use these information resources for their academic research. It would be useful for both librarians and faculty to understand the underlying problems in order to provide them with appropriate support

There are many international researches on the information seeking behaviour of the undergraduates but any comprehensive research with a university-wide coverage is not evident in the Sri Lankan context. As far as University of Peradeniya is concerned, several studies have been carried out at faculty and department levels. However, university-level study is yet to be reported. To fill this void a survey was carried out in 2013 to study the information seeking strategies of the undergraduates and this paper presents the finding of one aspect of the major study.

Objectives

Specific objectives of this paper are 1) to present the use of classmates by the undergraduates as an information resource, 2) to present the use of classmates by the undergraduates to seek assistance in evaluating information resources, 3) to analyse and interpret the findings based on the previously published research outcomes, and 4) to make recommendations for remedial measures.

Methodology

Head and Eisenberg (2009a) carried out a national survey covering about 8000 undergraduates in American universities and their survey instrument was adopted for this current survey. This instrument was considered because of its open access availability, and the content and construct validity of the instrument has already been determined by the authors. In addition, several other countries have used the adapted versions of the instrument thus would enable a comparison of the findings. Although the original survey was conducted online, the Sri Lankan study was carried out using printed questionnaires as the Sri Lankan students are not much familiar with online surveys and because the limited access to computers by some students could have affected the response rate.

Faculties of Agriculture, Allied Health Science, Arts, Dental Science, Engineering, Medicine, Science and Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science were considered for the survey and Stratified random sampling method was used to select 10% of second, third and fourth year students. First year students were not considered as their information seeking behaviour was not

considered to be developed adequately to respond to the survey effectively. The total sample was 460 undergraduates (excluding Faculty of Medicine¹).

Survey instrument contained five sections covering the biographic details, types of assignments they receive and types and frequency of using different information resources, Further, data on the information resources they use, criteria used to evaluate the resources, people they consulted for help with their research related information practices were also included. Two other sections, which were not in the original survey instrument, were added to gather more information. These include the places where the undergraduates access computers, and the training they received in using the library and Internet. Use of classmates by the respondents in their information seeking process is presented in this paper and the findings from several other sections of the survey have been are drawn into support the discussion. The questionnaire gathered Likert type responses of seven categories and “almost always” and “often” categories were conflated to a new category of “often” and the responses of this category are considered throughout this paper. Questionnaires were administered mainly through the library and in two faculties through the departments. As the responses are mainly personal perceptions towards the questions asked, the findings depend upon the degree of accuracy of the responses. However, the findings could be used to understand the general trend of the information resource usage of the undergraduates.

Findings

The overall response rate was 79% (363 students) and Table 1 illustrates the discipline-wise response rate. The majority of them (55%) were in the age group of 21-23 years, while 39% were 24-26 years old and 6% were over 26 years. Of the respondents, 44% were male while 56% were female.

Table 1 – Total sample and the responses

Faculty	Total Sample	Total Resp.	%
Agriculture	69	67	97
Arts	157	104	66
Engineering	124	102	82
Health Science	82	66	80
Science	28	24	86
Total	460	363	79

The findings of the survey indicated that, 67% use classmates as an information resource while 68% seek assistance from their classmates when they need assistance with evaluating information resources (Table 2).

¹ Faculty of Medicine was excluded from the survey as the number of responses received were not adequate.

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

Discipline	Use of Classmates as an Information Resource	%	Use of Classmates to seek assistance in evaluating information resources	%
Agriculture	44	66	41	61
Arts	64	62	69	66
Engineering	70	69	72	71
Health Sciences	48	73	45	68
Science	19	79	21	88
Total	245	67	248	68

As Figure 1 illustrates, there are discipline-based variations. Science undergraduates seem to be depending on their classmates, more than the undergraduates in other disciplines do, as an information resource and to seek assistance with evaluating information resources. Arts undergraduates record the lowest use (62%) of classmates as an information resource while Agriculture records the lowest percentage of using classmates to seek assistance with evaluating information resources.

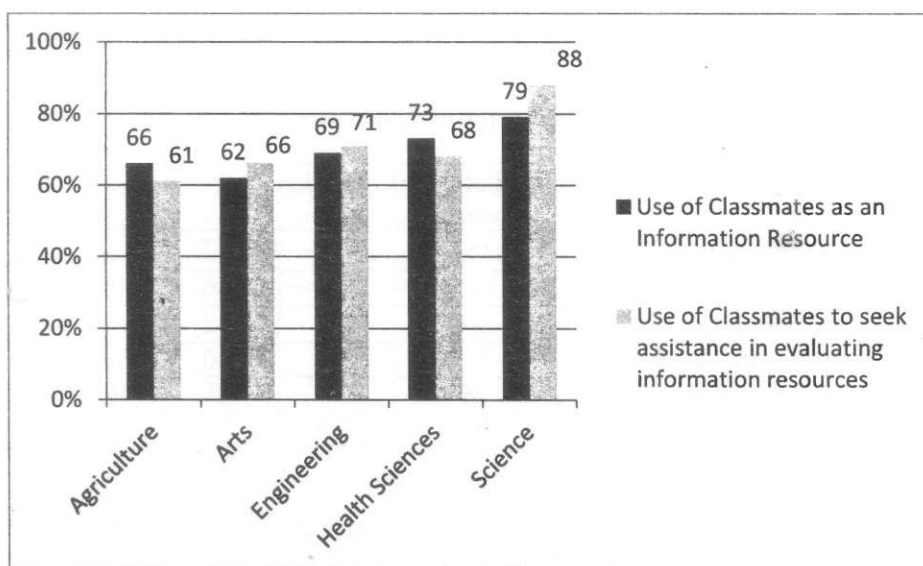


Figure 1 – Use of Classmates by the undergraduates in support of their research

Discussion

The main survey sought information on the usage of several other human resources by the undergraduates for their course related research and it was found that the use of classmates as an information resource (67%) is higher than their use of lecturers (63%), friends and family (40%) and librarians (25%). The main survey also inquired about several other types of people from whom they seek assistance with evaluating information resources and the findings established that they turn to classmates than to any other category, i.e. only 59% turn to their lecturers, and 20% turn to the librarians. These findings prove that the respondents of the survey give more priority to their classmates as an information source, than to those who are more experienced and are reliable sources of information, like their lecturers and librarians. The significant question to be considered here is that how competent are the classmates to support their peers in their course-related information seeking and evaluation activities. The findings of the main survey, in response to a question on the difficulties encountered with research-related information tasks, established that, 77% of the respondents had difficulties with finding information resources and 82% had difficulties with evaluating the resources. Findings of the survey also proved that 52% of the respondents have not received any training in using the library or internet and that 57% would like the library to offer such training (while 14% said no and 29% was undecided). Under these circumstances, the classmates who have problems of their own, information resource selection and evaluation are not the best source of human information resource or the best group to be consulted by their own peers, when in need for assistance by the undergraduates.

This trend of depending on classmates was compared with two other studies, which used the same survey instrument. Head and Eisenberg (2010) established in their study that, 65% of the respondents used classmates as an information resource while 32% used classmates, to seek assistance with evaluating the information resources. Cheunwattana...et.al. (2012) ascertained that 43% of their respondents from six Thai universities, used classmates as an information resource while 38.41% used classmates to seek assistance with evaluating the information resources. The findings of the current survey are closer to that of Head and Eisenberg (2010) with respect to the use of classmates as an information resource but not in using them to seek assistance. Use of classmates for both purposes, are much higher than that of Cheunwattana...et.al (2012). Lee, Paik and Joo (2012) studying the information resource selection of undergraduates in South Korea ascertained that, 27.6% of their subjects use friends and colleagues for comparison of findings with one's own, 13% use them to obtain advice on a task and 12.2% use them to obtain advice on search process. They further established that 11.4% use colleagues and friends because of ease of accessibility, 4.1% use because of efficiency, and 3.3% because of understanding. While further in-depth study is required to confirm why such a higher percentage turn to their classmates for support with their research, in the Sri Lankan context, findings of the previous studies can throw some light on this trend.

Many previous researches have established that, *ease of accessibility* is a factor affecting the use of information resources (Burton and Chadwick 2000, Fidel and Green 2004, Kim and Sin 2007, Lee, Han and Joo 2008, Liu and Yang 2004 and Xie and Joo 2009). It is also confirmed that, *ease of use* of the information resource is a deciding factor (Burton and Chadwick 2000, Kim and Sin 2007, Liu and Yang 2004 and Xie and Joo 2009). *Convenience* has been identified (Quigley...et.al 2002 and Xie and Joo 2009) as another factor, which affects the selection of information resources by the students. Research has also confirmed that students of some disciplines i.e. engineering, prefer channels that require the least effort (Kerins ...et.al. 2004, Ercegovic 2009 and Ward 2001), and that they tend to rely heavily on informal information sources and consult one another within their own social spheres (Ellis and Haugan 1997) in their

information seeking process. The Sri Lankan respondents also may have found that it is convenient to turn to their classmates for information and support with evaluating information resources than their lecturers or librarians. However, more research will be necessary to pinpoint the specific factors.

Conclusion

Although the respondents use their classmates more than their lecturers or librarians as an information resource and to seek assistance with evaluating information resources, findings of the survey have proved that over one third of the respondents themselves have difficulties with these aspects. Hence, it is clear that, the classmates are not the best information resource or support group. While in-depth research is required to establish the exact reasons for the high dependency on classmates by the respondents in their information seeking process for academic research, previous research proved that accessibility, ease of use, convenience, and reliance on informal information sources affect the information resource selection.

Recommendations

Since the students are turning towards their classmates because of convenience, familiarity, and ease of accessibility, it is strongly recommended that, the faculty and librarians jointly launch initiatives to empower the undergraduates, so that they are capable of helping each other and direct them to the more experienced groups like lecturers and librarians whenever the peers cannot help them. It will be useful to launch awareness programs focused on using the information resources and evaluating information resources. If the time limitations do not allow face-to-face sessions, handouts, brochures, library site and social media could be used to provide such guidance.

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