

Sustainable Future of Academic Libraries: Unveiling the Student Voice

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Today, academic libraries are facing unprecedented challenges due to the vast availability of online information sources. The new generations of undergraduates, who are the main user group of academic libraries are highly tech-savvy and belong to the demographic cohort of digital natives. There is a dire need for academic libraries to evolve and adapt to the needs of new generations of users to thrive in the future. The objectives of the study are to identify library usage (2013-2023), underpinning reasons, and future expectations of undergraduates of the University of Colombo. It incorporates a qualitative research methodology and a single-site case study approach. This study consists of two phases. In phase 1, annual reports and other internal documents of the Library were analysed to determine the number of books borrowed during the period. In phase 2, in-depth interviews were conducted with undergraduates representing Level 1-4 from all the faculties served by the Main and Science Libraries. Twenty-four subjects were interviewed for a total of 8 hours until data saturation and analysis was conducted using the interpretive discourse analytical approach. Data obtained through document analysis revealed a decline in book borrowings by undergraduates. In 2013, the number of books issued per user/ year was 6.6, while in 2023 it was 1.6, and the decline rate was 24.24%. Undergraduates have moved to alternative information sources such as websites, open-access e-books, e-journals, subject gateways, Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, lecturer's personal reading materials uploaded to Learning Management Systems, and social media for information retrieval. The main reasons behind this shift were easy access, availability (24/7), and saving time. Results also revealed a gap between the services provided by the library and the undergraduates' expectations. The digital transformation of library services, adopting AI tools, establishing interactive communication channels, and creating conducive learning spaces with cutting-edge technologies were among the expectations of undergraduates. In order to sustain the future, libraries should listen to the voice of the new generation and change accordingly.

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