

CRY FOR HELP: THE URGENCY FOR RESEARCH SKILLS TRAINING FOR UNDERGRADUATES OF UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

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There are no previous research reported relating to the research skills of the undergraduates of the university and this paper attempts to fill this gap. Findings are drawn from a major survey on "Information seeking and research strategies of undergraduates in the digital age". The objectives of the paper are 1) to present the difficulty levels of various information-related tasks in their research process 2) to analyze the factors affecting these trends and 3) to make recommendations to improve their information-related research skills.

Data were gathered from 558 undergraduates (excluding Faculty of Medicine) and the response rate was 77% (427 students). Twenty statements related to research related tasks (RRTs), under six sections (Starting, searching, evaluating, using, citing, and completing) were presented for the undergraduates to mark their level of difficulty.

The findings were alarming. All twenty tasks were difficult for them and the percentages varied from 93% (getting started is difficult) to 67% (finding sources from Internet is difficult). Difficulties with RRTs are not uncommon, but in several other international studies, the percentages were not as high as in this context. The main reason for the difficulties encountered by respondents is the lack of training in information skills. According to other findings of the same survey, 245 (44%) expect a training from the library (Further 44% were undecided, perhaps, because they were unaware that the library can offer such support). In addition to lack of training opportunities, 304 (71%) students contact classmates as an information resource and 313 of them (73%) turn to their classmates when assistance is needed with evaluating information resources. Only 269 (63%) turn to lecturers and 98 (23%) turn to librarians for help. This proved that any professional support is not available for undergraduates to guide them in their research-related information seeking. Ability to realize the need for reliable and relevant information, and possessing skills to search, evaluate, and integrate into one's own work ethically to create new knowledge are globally accepted requirements of graduates as these skills empower them to be critical thinkers and adapt to the changing world of work. In order to produce fitting graduates, their research skills must be improved through planned Information Literacy programme.

It is recommended that the teachers and librarians collaborate without further delay to provide training in information skills (IS) to undergraduates. Lack of time has been a major constraint to offer such training, within the already overcrowded timetables, therefore initiatives need to be taken to offer IS training through the e-learning initiative of the university, so that the undergraduates can take these courses in their own time. As a measure of encouragement, the programmes need to be assessed so that the high performers are acknowledged duly.

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