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DIGITAL INFORMATION RESOURCE PREFERENCES OF UNDERGRADUATES: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FACULTIES OF AGRICULTURE, ARTS, ENGINEERING, AND SCIENCE OF UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

Pradeepa Wijetunge

Main Library, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
librarianpdn@gmail.com

Any comprehensive research covering the information seeking behaviour of the undergraduates of the University of Peradeniya is not evident. To fill this gap, the researcher carried out a university-wide survey, and used the findings of one aspect for this paper, with special reference to the Faculties of Agriculture (FAG), Arts (FA), Engineering (FE) and Science (FS). The objectives of the paper are 1) to present the trends of the use of Digital Information Resources (DIR) for academic activities by the undergraduates in the four faculties, 2) to analyse the factors affecting their DIR usage pattern, and 3) to make recommendations to improve their use of DIR. Of 415 surveyed, 315 (76%) responded to the questionnaire. Overall findings indicated that, Search Engines (SE) are used by 82%, Wikipedia (W) by 63%, Government Websites (GW) by 27%, and full text databases (dbs) by 19%. However, there are faculty-wise variations. FAG recorded the highest use of DIR (SEs by 96%, W by 73%, GW by 52% and dbs by 18%). FS recorded a similar use of SEs (87%) and W (70%) to that of FAG but the use of GW (11%) and dbs (2%) in the FS is the lowest among all the faculties. FA recorded the highest use of dbs (33%). The most noticeable finding was the low use of databases (despite the availability of JSTOR and CABI in CD/ ROMs), against the comparatively high usage of search engines and Wikipedia, in all faculties studied.

This trend could be due to several factors; (1) Low level of access to computers, which hinders the access to IP authenticated JSTOR-in the FS where the use of dbs is the lowest students per computer ratio is 85:1. CABI CDs are not lent out, hence students have to depend on the library computers (only 2 for the use of students), to use CABI. (2) Discouraging format of the DIR, - CABI requires frequent change of CDs to search, which could be highly discouraging. (3) Absence of training - even in the FA where the students per computer ration is 11:1, the use of dbs (33%) is low. The findings established that none of these faculties offer training in using DIR and previous international research has established that the absence/lack of training drives the students from scholarly databases to SEs and Wikipedia as their search interfaces are more user friendly for the naïve users. It can be construed that, absence of training affects the usage of DIR in the faculties studied. 4) Lack of relevance of the available databases to the curricula and 5) Lack of motivation to access the scholarly information resources for course work, but further research is required to assess the relevance and motivation in the context of the four faculties.

It is recommended to offer focused training in using DIR, for all academic years without further delay; to increase the number of computers for students; to provide relevant scholarly material (in the FE); and subscribe to the online version of CABI.