ELECTRONIC INFORMATION RESOURCES (EIR): DO THE UNDERGRADUATES REAP THE BENEFITS OF INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY?

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Introduction

Information and communication technology is a pioneering subject, and is undergoing a rapid change in the present world. "Knowledge" has become a highly valuable economic commodity. In this rapidly changing world, libraries play the pivotal role of storing ever changing knowledge. Among all categories of libraries, Academic Libraries or University Libraries can be described as the forefront organization in generating knowledge. Undergraduates are one of the principal beneficiaries of a University Library. Therefore, it can be assumed that undergraduates are prominent users of a University Library.

The University of Peradeniya Library Network (hereafter UPLN) which is the oldest and largest academic library network in Sri Lanka, renders valuable service to its user community. The Main Library of UPLN is physically the largest library in the country and holds the largest collection of monographs, amounting to nearly 0.75 million. Though the Main Library is considered to be the focal point of the UPLN, its services are mainly focused towards the Faculty of Arts of the University. Accordingly, 90% of its collection has been allocated to fulfill the information needs of the Faculty of Arts. The principal reason for this is that it is located in the precincts of the Faculty of Arts.

While printed material comprises the largest portion of the information resource collection of the Main Library, the UPLN has brought in various Electronic Information Resources (EIR) for the benefit of its users. Some of the important resources are Electronic Journals, databases, study CD's DVD's (TOEFL, IELTS, SAT etc.), Networked computer facilities, Electronic inquiry facilities, OPAC / Web OPAC, downloading and copying facilities, etc. Apart from purchase of printed material, the Library spends a substantial amount of money to provide the above services. This study attempts to find out how these Electronic Information Resources are being utilized by the undergraduates of this University.

Objectives

The first objective was to find out whether the undergraduates were aware of the available Electronic Information Resources (hereafter EIR). The second objective was to discover the reasons why the undergraduates use or do not use EIR for their academic activities. The third objective was to find out the preference (choice) of the undergraduates, whether they favor print resources or the Electronic resources. The last objective was to get to know the proposals and views of the undergraduates for enhancing the EIR services currently being delivered by the UPLN.

Methodology and research instruments

The area of the study was the Faculty of Arts. The undergraduates of the Faculty of Arts were used as the research population. Fifty students who represented each subject taught in the Faculty of Arts were picked as the research sample. Except the First year students, 50 students from 2nd, 3rd, 4th year who are specializing were selected for the study.

The questionnaires were distributed among these 50 students. In addition, 10 students who frequently use computers in the Library and usually get the services of the Library IT unit were selected for the study.

Results

The results and observations of this study are be listed below:

1. The majority of the students (around 30%) do not possess a sound knowledge of EIR provided by the Library.
2. Undergraduates use the computers provided by the Library for mere entertainment purposes, e.g. to send E-Mails, to read online versions of the newspapers for online chat, for downloading pictures and funny videos, SMS and for other amusements.
3. Most of the undergraduates have never visited the Library website. Due to this reason they were not able to get a clear idea about the EIR provided by the Library. Once users visit the UPLN website, they can access electronic journals provided by UPLN.
4. The knowledge of and preference for OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue) remains at higher levels. Use of OPAC and training on how to use OPAC are commendable.
5. Another important reason why the students do not properly use EIR is lack of English knowledge and the lack of IT skills. It is clear that undergraduates who possess a good English knowledge and IT literacy use EIR to the optimum levels.

Discussion

The reasons for the poor use of EIR should be clearly identified. It was discovered that the students were not aware of or did not posses knowledge on EIR. They have stated that the two main reasons for this trend are:

1. Most students were not aware of and have not clear idea about EIR provided by UPLN. They requested a detailed user education program on the services provided by the UPLN. This user education program should surpass the usual user orientation program conducted by the Library staff when new entrants visit the Library.
2. The second reason they stated was that the academic staff members of the faculty do not properly guide or motivate students to utilize EIR.

Conclusion

In this ever changing modern world Information and Communication Technology (ICT) too changes rapidly. It is doubtful whether the benefits of ICT- one being fully utilized by the university community. Reasons for this are the lack of knowledge or unawareness, and the underlying problems with the services. The university student should be prepared to face the challenges of the modern world. They should acquaint themselves with modern world developments and should update their knowledge constantly. In this context, undergraduates will benefit immensely through EIR. But to reap these benefits students should be knowledgeable in modern ICT and also should develop a commitment towards this. The university library spends a substantial amount of funds and exerts a great effort to give these facilities to the undergraduates, but the poor utilization has compromised the rationale behind it. The responsibility for this predicament should be equally shared by students, the teaching staff and the library management.