Information Resources and Services Used by Undergraduate Students at University

(A Case of First Year Students at University of Eswatini)

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Abstract: On the assumption that first year Students at university do not have adequate knowledge on the available library resources and services and also lack basic information search skills, which results in poor and under-utilisation of these resources and services. This paper reviews large body of research to establish the extent to which undergraduate students at universities utilised library resources and services. The objectives of the study were to: identify the information-seeking experiences; describe the types of library resources and services used; and describe the different information-seeking behaviours. The analysis showed that students had information needs to support their academic work and relied more on library books and journals with little use of electronic resources. The study revealed that students did not use certain library services because of inadequate knowledge. They preferred using easier information search strategies, thereby making their information-seeking efforts less-effective. It is recommended that lecturers should consider giving students assignments that would require the use of electronic resources since it has been revealed that most students do not use electronic resources. Secondly, the library and the departments should design a subject-oriented information literacy skills programme to be taken at different information level.

Keywords: Information seeking, library, needs, utilisation, strategies, students, undergraduates.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a large body of literature focussing on the use of library resources and services by university students in different contexts. Their contribution provides useful insights on this paper. This article is organised into the following sections: information needs, information resources and services
used by undergraduate students, information-seeking strategies used by university students, user satisfaction and challenges faced by university students when using library resources and services. The objective of this article is to describe the different information-seeking behaviours used by university students. There is a gap that it aims at filling by contributing to the understanding of how students use library resources and services. The article hopes to contribute towards informing current practices in the area of education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature study is informed by Ellis Model of information seeking.

2.1 Information needs

Information seeking results from the recognition of some need perceived by the user, who as a consequence, makes demands upon formal systems, such as libraries, information centres, on-line services or informal systems, such as lecturers, colleagues or some other person in order to satisfy that perceived need (Wilson, 1997). Information needs is understood as coming from a vague awareness of something missing and as culminating in locating information that contributes to understanding and meaning (Kuhlthau, 1994). As a result of an information need, students tend to be involved in a purposeful search for library resources in order to acquire useful information. Kuhlthau (1994) argued that it is the information need that triggers information-seeking which is caused by uncertainty due to a lack of understanding or a gap in meaning. According to the Ellis model, this is the starting point where the student becomes aware of inadequate knowledge or understanding on a specific task. Solomon (1996) noted that as individuals and groups we repeatedly find ourselves in situations where information is needed, gathered, sought, organized, retrieved, processed, evaluated and used in order to meet our information needs and this is done through the different library resources provided.

In a study on university undergraduate students’ information-seeking behaviour and its implications for quality in higher education in Africa, Ajiboye and Tella (2007) found that the predominant information required by undergraduate students is academic information which ranked the highest with 64 percent. The study also found that other information required by the students was information for personal development, health, employment and global. These results are supported by a study on information-seeking behaviour of undergraduate students in the humanities in three universities in Nigeria by Baro, Onyenama and Osaheni (2010) that also revealed that the predominant information needed by undergraduate students is academic information. This information is required to enable students to write their assignments, seminar papers, for class discussions, examinations and tests and to write their final year papers more than any other information as on personal life, social life, health, employment and global issues.

The information needs of distance and part-time students are not unique; they have the same information needs as full-time students (Dugan & Hernon, 1997). In a study on information needs and information-seeking behaviour of distance learners at the Institute of Extra-Mural Studies in Lesotho, Boadi and Letsolo (2004) found that the majority (74%) of respondents indicated that they needed information that was relevant to their programmes of study, while 64 percent needed information that was easily accessible, 40 percent preferred information that was current. In a study that sought to establish factors influencing distance education graduate students’ use of information sources, Liu and Yang (2004) established that the students preferred easy and fast information retrieval on their field of study. In Botswana, Oladokun and Aina (2009) investigated the library and information needs and barriers to the use of information sources by continuing education students at the University of Botswana. The researchers found that the major areas of information needs of the respondents related to the course of study, job opportunities, career development and further education. Understanding the actual needs of information users and taking steps to meet them is the first step towards effective service provision in an academic environment. However, some studies reveal that university libraries do not adequately cater for the information needs of continuing education students and this affects their access to library resources (Oladokun & Aina, 2009; Rowland & Rubbert, 2001).
2.2 Information resources and services used by undergraduate students

Selection of library resources is the first and most essential step in the information search process. The emergence of Internet makes electronic information sources more accessible and preferred by users. This is because electronic information is easy, convenient and faster to access. In the digital age, electronic, human and printed resources are the common information sources selected by users; in particular, electronic resources have become more and more prevalent as major information sources for users to fulfill different types of search tasks. There are two types of information sources, namely: formal and informal. Formal sources include library books, encyclopaedias, journals etc. Informal sources include lecturers, peers, and any other person. The sources that students turn to for information differ from time to time. Shouse (1995), in her study on library needs of rural distance education students, identified convenience as the most important factor in distance education students’ information source selection.

In a study on information-seeking behaviour of faculty members in Rajabhat universities in Bangkok, Patitungkho and Deshpande (2005) found that information seeking is expressed in various forms, from reading printed material to research and experimentation. They also found that scholars, students and faculties actively sought for current information from various media available in libraries such as encyclopaedias, journals and, more recently, electronic media. In a study on the information seekers’ perspectives of libraries and librarians, Abels (2004) established that the frequency of use of the Internet from 1998 – 2000 has greatly increased and at the same time expenditure on monographs also showed a steady increase which clearly illustrates that the influence of on-line reading has not deterred the spending on monographs. This also shows that students use different sources of information to meet their information needs and tend to use the new media as and when they are made available to them.

A study by Fidzani (1998) that sought to establish the information needs and information-seeking behaviour of undergraduate students in Botswana found that there was a heavy reliance on library books, and journals as sources of information used for coursework by students. In a recent study in the United Kingdom, Urquhart, Lonsale, Thomas, Spink, Yeoman and Armstrong (2006) looked at the uptake and use of electronic information services, and found that books are still considered a reliable basic resource of information for students’ academic work. The study established that many students still turn to books as well as the Internet for academic queries, with books used more frequently than the Internet. An earlier study by Osiobe (1998) on information-seeking behaviour established that browsing through journals was the most important source of finding references for undergraduate students. The researcher also noted that students did also seek help from library staff, which includes, reference librarian and subject librarian when they encountered problems.

On the other hand, Ajiboye and Tella (2007) found in their study that students actually used the Internet to locate information than through the library since they found it easier and faster in meeting their information needs. This shows that today information technology has developed rapidly and has made a huge impact on access to information-seeking of students. Students are moving more to the Internet as one of the available sources of information. Karim and Hasan (2006) also noted the exponential growth of digital information which changes the way students’ select library resources. They reported that students download and print materials from the Internet in order to study or read later.

In a study on developing scales for information-seeking behaviour in the Netherlands, Timmers and Glas (2010) established that the popular search engines used by undergraduate students these days are Google and Yahoo. The researchers, however, indicate that as much as more students search the World Wide Web when seeking for information, the type of resources used by students change overtime.

A study by Rowland and Rubbert (2001) that sought to evaluate the information needs and practices of part-time and distance learning students in the United Kingdom established that books and journals were found to be the information sources most frequently used by the students. In addition, the study established that part-time students were increasingly making use of electronic information sources in their information search process as a result of the increasing use of the digital environment.
2.3 Information-seeking strategies used by university students

Meadow (1991) defined a search strategy as the general plan for finding the needed information for learning, teaching and research. This can take many forms such as: use of card/on-line catalogues, browsing and assistance from library staff and through the use of computers, the Internet and different search engines. Students use different information-searching strategies depending on their earlier exposure to information searching. In a study to determine the search strategies university students use in the process of their search for information, Kaikai, Ikoja-Odongo and Kigongo-Bukinya (2004) found that starting, chaining and browsing were the common search strategies used by students to meet their information needs. The researchers further established that the students’ starting behaviour (initial stage of information-seeking) involved using recommended reading lists, searching through the subject catalogue, inquiring directly from the lecturers and colleagues, searching directly on the shelves, searching through e-resources, journals, table of contents and surfing the Internet.

In an earlier study on information needs and information-seeking behaviour of undergraduate students in Botswana, Fidzani (1998) revealed that students primarily relied on browsing the shelves or journals than using the index and abstract databases as their strategies for seeking information. In a study on how college students use the web for research, Thompson (2003) found that students preferred to start their information search with search engines, sought help from peers or from faculty and did not consult library staff or seek assistance from library websites. On the other hand, a study on undergraduate research behaviour in a library without books in the University of Georgia, Van Scoyoc and Cason (2006) found that students also used search engines and web portals 76 percent of the time and class websites were used almost frequently at 71 percent of the time. The study also revealed that the Library On-line Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) and licenced databases were the least used at 36 percent of the time.

2.4 User satisfaction

Applegate (1997) defined user satisfaction as a personal and emotional reaction to a library service or product. Library resources and services are critical to user satisfaction. Libraries that are able to provide user information needs are likely to achieve higher levels of user satisfaction. In a study on academic staff and students perspectives on user satisfaction with academic libraries, Adeniran (2011) found that the user satisfaction is a function of the quality of staff and services of a library. This means that user satisfaction would be significantly higher in libraries which are well-stocked and the resources properly arranged and managed by well-qualified staff than in libraries with less qualified and impolite staff. In this case, users will be encouraged to make use of the library where the quality of resources and services rendered to them will help satisfy their information needs. The study also revealed that the provision of relevant library resources and services, access point and conducive environment for learning, teaching and research may lead to an increase in the use of the library and its resources and services.

These findings confirm earlier findings of Andaleeb and Simmonds (1998) in their study on explaining user satisfaction with academic libraries; they found that with quality library resources and services, greater responsiveness and greater perceived competence of library staff and the better perceived overall physical appearance of library facilities, the greater the level of user satisfaction. Users will also be encouraged to visit and use the library and its resources and services frequently. The results of this study suggest that academic libraries focus on two major elements which are resources and demeanour in providing user satisfaction. The resources are important because academic library users frequent their libraries to find solutions to their academic problems and needs. The findings of the study also suggest that library users, especially students accord significant importance to the demeanour of the library staff. This includes staff sensitivity to user needs, willingness to listen to user problems, being polite, courteous and reassuring.

2.5 Challenges faced by university students when using library resources and services

The ability to utilize library resources and services by university students depends largely on their information-seeking skills. Information-seeking is a highly complex task involving interaction among the user, information need and the information source. In the course of seeking information,
the users may experience a number of challenges. The inability to effectively exploit the resources of university libraries is not a problem that is associated with a particular type or group of students, the problem is multi-dimensional, it confronts undergraduate, post-graduate as well as adult learners (Zondi, 1992).

Most university students have had no prior contact with academic libraries before enrolling at the university. This poses a number of challenges when students are required to search for information in the library and within a tight time schedule. This problem is common in countries such as Swaziland. Most university libraries offer a course on library-skills to all first-year undergraduate students. However, students still find it difficult to use the library effectively and as a result some students go directly to the shelves to locate and retrieve books without using the appropriate tools such as, card or on-line catalogue. A lot of energy is, therefore, used in accessing library materials and a lot of time wasted (Adedibu, 2008).

A study by Zondi (1992) among first-year undergraduate students at the University of Zululand on library-use skills and information-seeking patterns, established that the majority of the students showed very low levels of competence in the use of the library and also displayed poor information-seeking patterns. A similar study in Uganda by Kamanda (1999) on library-use by university students in Makerere University established that more than half of the students experienced problems in locating library information materials. The study noted that a majority of students either located materials through browsing the shelves or sought assistance from library staff and they did not make full use of the library catalogues. In most libraries, the card and on-line catalogues are the most essential library tools in accessing the library collection. It has been noted that students are bound to experience problems if they bypass these important tools (Kamanda, 1999).

Fister (1992) noted that though university students are smart people; they find the university library to be a threatening place and the process of doing research intimidating because they did not have adequate library skills. Fister noted that students do not learn the basic information skills and end up using trial and error methods of research that limits their capabilities to satisfy their academic needs. It is strange that students don’t utilise the information acquired from the library course in first-year. However, an earlier study by Mellon (1986) on library anxiety, established that undergraduate students encounter barriers such as library anxiety when searching for information. This may partly explain why students fail to utilise the skills acquired from the library skills course offered in first-year. It is necessary to find ways of removing the barriers that keep students from using the library resources effectively and this can only be possible if the challenges and/or problems faced by these students are known.

A study by Waldman (2003) on freshmen’s use of library electronic resources and self-efficacy revealed that age is one variable that correlates with comfort with computers and use of electronic resources. The younger generations have been brought up with computers; many do not even remember a time when computers were not around. Older and continuing education students may not have had as much exposure to computers, resulting in increased anxiety. This observation by Waldman shows anxiety towards computers in older students which may be a challenge as they use the electronic library resources in their information search.

3. DISCUSSION

From the literature reviewed it has been noted that for students to be engaged in library use where library resources and services are availed, there has to be an information need. As a result of this need, the students tend to be involved in a purposeful search for library resources and services in order to acquire useful information to meet their information needs. It has also been observed that selection of library resources is the first and important step in the information search process. The sources that students turn to for information differ from time to time and this depends on the users’ previous experience and what they found to be the easiest type of format to use. This literature also indicates that students use different strategies when searching for information. Some of these strategies are effective in identifying and locating useful sources of information whilst others are not effective since they are time consuming.
It has also been indicated by the literature that the major elements that contribute to user satisfaction in academic libraries are quality of resources and services and also positive demeanour of the library staff. The literature reviewed has also highlighted a number of challenges and/or problems faced by students as they use library resources and services. These challenges and/or problems can be a barrier as students search for information for their academic work. Based on the review of literature, it transpired that not much has been done on the topic in the country. The little that has been done has not been placed for the public domain as a result it could not be located.

4. CONCLUSIONS
The literature in this article revealed that undergraduate students had information needs that were academic in nature. This indicates that they sought for information resources because of a gap in knowledge which they had to fill-up. This observation was made by several researchers with different students in varied contexts who also found that students’ information-seeking behaviour often involved acting on purposeful information search as this was necessitated by the pressure to complete course assignments or prepare for tests and examinations. The literature also revealed that undergraduate students heavily relied on library books and journals on print format with very little use of other information sources such as electronic resources, whereas over-dependence on print resources could lead to a narrow knowledge-base which would undermine the whole educational process. This finding concurred with studies by Findzani (1998), Mabawonku, (2004) and Oky (2000), which indicated that students relied on books and journals more often than on any other materials in the library.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS
Lecturers should consider giving students assignments that would require the use of electronic resources since it has been revealed that most students do not use electronic resources. Secondly, the library and the departments should design a subject-oriented information literacy skills programme to be taken at different information levels, preferably, where students are expected to prepare research projects as the library skills course is only available to first-year students taking academic communication skills (ACS). It would be ideal to look into the information-seeking behaviours of lecturers in the universities in order to understand how they could be of help to the students in their information-seeking strategies. This would be important because, if lecturers demonstrate less effective information-seeking strategies, then their students are likely to exhibit similar tendencies.

6. SEARCH PROCEDURE
This literature review was informed by the first author’s practice and experience working at the library as the assistant librarian in the Readers Services department assisting students when seeking information to pursue their studies. Multiple databases (e.g. Google scholar, and, EBSCOhost, EBsco ebooks, Emerald Management journals, Sabinet E-Journals, ERIC; Education Resource Information Centre, Wiley online journals and Cambridge University press Journals) were searched for articles and abstracts available in English between 1986 and 2014. The following search terms were used individually and in various combinations: information needs, information seeking, resources, library, information seeking behaviour, utilisation, library resources, public, students, undergraduates and academic. The reference sections of some articles were further examined for additional relevant articles. Articles reporting survey and qualitative research as well as books addressing library use were reviewed. Articles without information related to library use and information seeking were excluded.

7. REFERENCES
Ajiboye, J.O., & Tella, A. (2007). University undergraduate students’ information-seeking


