Information Literacy Initiatives in Sri Lankan University Libraries

WMTD Ranasinghe   **A S Siriwardana**

Abstract

Information literacy (IL) which is described as the ability to recognize when information is needed, and to be able to locate and evaluate the appropriate information and use it effectively, have become prerequisite for all levels of education including higher education. Objective of this study is to examine to what extent the IL is practiced in university libraries in Sri Lanka. It studies the effectiveness of existing user education (UE) programs as well as IL programs in 15 national university libraries in Sri Lanka. The survey questionnaire is used as the primary data collection instrument and the findings of the study are discussed in this paper. Study revealed that all the responded university libraries (73%) are conducting UE programs and only 63% out of them have introduced IL programs. However, it was identified that majority of these IL programs are only extensions of existing UE programs and as a result, no proper contribution can be expected by them on the improvement of IL skills among user community. Suggestions are made to overcome this issue and the study has emphasized the need for a national policy framework on IL skills development.

1.   Introduction

Higher Education in the new century has to deal with competition and flexible learning and critical thinking to enable students more productive. Developing lifelong learners has become central to the mission of higher and other educational institutions. Educational institutions main objective is that to provide the foundation for continued growth throughout their careers, by ensuring that individuals think critically and to construct a framework for learning how to learn as well as in their roles as informed citizens and members of communities.

According to Thompson (2002) more recent decades have witnessed reform in higher education with greater focus on active learning, lifelong learning, critical thinking, problem-solving, career preparation, undergraduate research and assessment of learning outcomes. By quoting MacFarlane in his article, King (1995) states that learning-focused universities are based on production of independent, life-long learners.

1.1   Information Literacy

Information literacy is a prerequisite for lifelong learning and is common to all disciplines, to all learning environments, and to all levels of education. It enables learners to engage critically with content and extend their investigations, become more self directed, and assume greater control over their own learning. Information literacy extends learning beyond formal classroom settings and

supports individuals in self directed learning in all arenas of life. It is now considered by several international, national, regional and discipline-based accreditation associations as a key outcome for college students.

Information literacy is described as the ability to recognize when information is needed, and to be able to locate and evaluate the appropriate information and use it effectively (American Library Association 1989).

The American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989) further states that, an information literate is a person who must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. It states an information literate people are those who have learned how to learn and they are to take advantage of the opportunities inherent within the information society. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information & how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand.

Council of Australian University Librarians (2001) defines an information literate person is able to recognize a need for information, determine the extent of information needed, access the needed information efficiently, evaluate the information and its sources, incorporate selected information into their knowledge base, use information effectively to accomplish a purpose, understand economic, legal, social and cultural issues in the use of information, access and use information ethically and legally, classify, store, manipulate and redraft information collected or generated and recognize information literacy as a prerequisite for lifelong learning.

According to these definitions, information literacy is a set of skills which extends learning beyond formal classroom settings and augments students' competency with evaluating, managing, and using information. It has become a key component of, and contributor to, lifelong learning.

2.   University Libraries and Information Literacy

At a seminar conducted by the Netherlands Universities Foundation for International Cooperation (NUFFIC 1978), Universities have an important role to play directly and indirectly in national development including economic, social, political and cultural development.

In order to achieve the aims of university education, university libraries play a significant role. In his report to the American Council on Education, Carter (1966) states that the library is the heart of the university and no other single non-human factors are as closely related to the quality of graduate education. In other words, the objective of the University education in particular is attributed as the objective of its library and stated as to support, teaching, learning, research, and dissemination of knowledge through various resources and services.

Traditionally user education programs were designed to teach students the "Library Skills", necessary to use the library effectively. These programs were focused upon making students aware of and knowledgeable about library resources and services available for them.

The Information Explosion fueled by in part by a revolution in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has deeply affected academic libraries during the later decades of the 20th century. As a result, there is an increase of information resources available online, flexible delivery of information via networks, computer literate user community which affected for a change of the role of academic library. These recent trends in the library environment raise questions about the adequacy of the traditional approach in facing competencies of the Higher education. This environment has led libraries to develop strategies through user education to a broader concept of "Information Literacy".

Accordingly, libraries in academic institutions play a key role in improving IL skills of user community. University libraries have already started various initiatives ranging from introducing IL skills development programs and introducing IL modules to incorporating IL across university curricula. As a result, the role of the library in educating information-literate user community has widely recognized.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are;

  3.1 To identify the existing user education programs in university libraries in Sri Lanka

  3.2 To identify the drawback associated with those programs

  3.3 To identify the information literacy initiatives taken by the university libraries in Sri Lanka

  3.4 To evaluate the effectiveness of information literacy initiatives taken by university libraries

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Population and the Sample of the Study

There are 15 national universities in Sri Lanka governed under the University Grants Commission and the university library system in Sri Lanka consists of main libraries as well as faculty, departmental, postgraduate institutional & other affiliated institutional libraries.

Out of the above library population, only the fifteen (15) main university libraries were selected as the sample of this study.

4.2 Data Collection Instruments

The survey method was used to collect data for the present study and the researchers used two instruments to collect the primary data as follows:

1. Structured questionnaire

2. Follow-up interviews

A structured questionnaire was distributed via e-mail among the Librarians of the selected university libraries. The questionnaire aimed obtaining information on following areas:

♦ Library user population and library professional staff

♦ Library infrastructure facilities

♦ Present User Education programs

♦ Present Information Literacy programs

5. Findings of the Study and discussion

Out of fifteen (15) questionnaires distributed, eleven (11) libraries responded to the survey. Response rate to the survey was seventy-three percent (73%).

5.1 Nature of present user education programs

It was noteworthy that all libraries conduct user education (UE) programs and fifty percent (50%) of libraries had established a separate section for UE. All these programs covered new entrants to the university at the beginning of the academic year.

Figure - 1 further represents the user groups covered by the UE programs. Accordingly, all the libraries responded (100%) conduct UE programs targeting new entrants, while 54% and 72% of libraries target the postgraduate students and the academic staff members respectively.
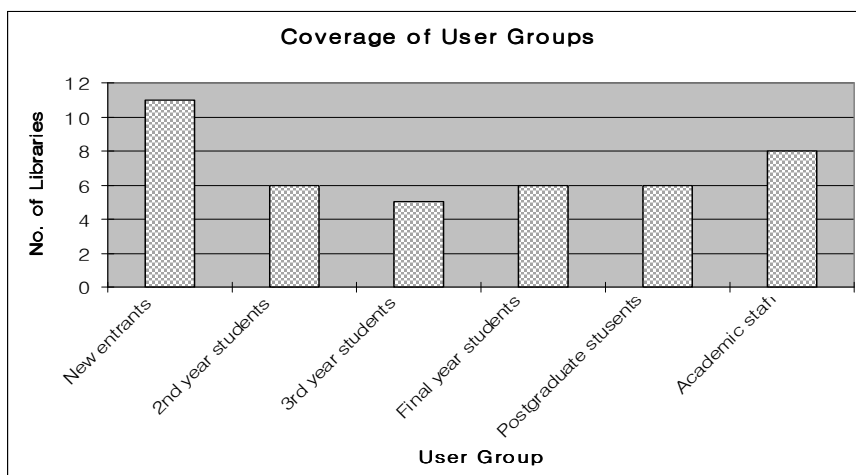

Figure 1 : Coverage of user groups

As far as the methods used for conducting UE programs are concerned, 90% of libraries use the lecture method for conducting UE programs and out of them, 70% of libraries organize a guided library tour followed by the introductory lecture. For these lectures, 90% of libraries use PowerPoint presentations, and another 30% use video programs as well. These lectures and guided tours are conducted by a team of librarians, led by the Librarian in-charge of reader services.

Figure - 2 displays the areas covered by the UE programs. Accordingly all the programs introduce the services and sections of the Library, rules and regulations and the membership procedures for their users. 90% of libraries introduce the Card Catalogue whereas 70% of libraries introduce the Library OPAC and use of reference materials.
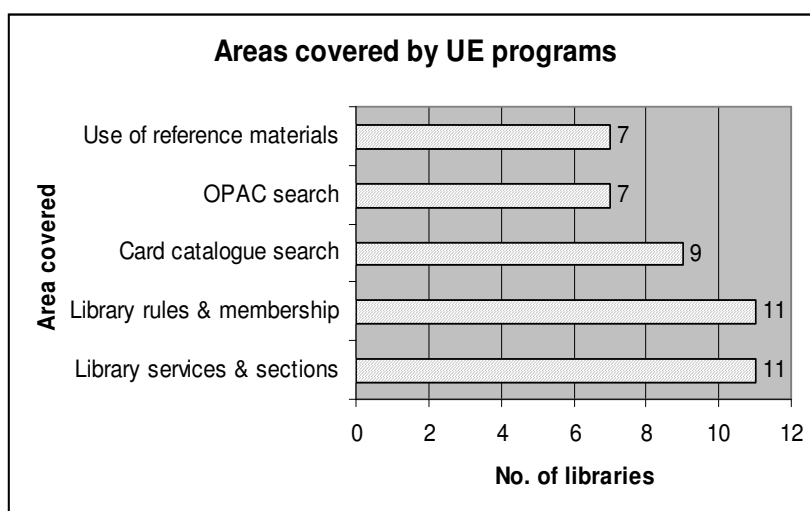
Figure 2 : Areas covered by UE programs

Ninety percent (90%) of librarians believed that the user education programs are essential, while another ten percent (10%) found it useful. However the inadequacy of library owned lecture rooms, computers, multimedia projectors, and dedicated staff to conduct UE programs were among the obstacles faced by the majority of libraries in conducting these programs.

5.2 Information literacy initiatives

Information Literacy (IL) is relatively a new concept for Sri Lankan university libraries. The IL programs initiated by the Universities have ranged from introductory IL programs to credit based IL courses. The findings related to available IL programs are discussed as follows.

According to the studied sample, sixty three (63%) percent of libraries have initiated IL programs (Figure - 3). Further findings on these IL programs are discussed hereafter as per these libraries.