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Information seeking trends among the Law course entrants in two Sri Lankan universities: a comparative study

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This comparative study is an attempt to understand the pre-university library experiences of two groups of Law course entrants in two universities. The study concentrated on the use of the school library before entering the university, some social media and the communication preferences, and established that both groups have effectively used the school libraries. Yet, there are variations between the groups in using the other information sources such as websites, smart phones, select social media, etc. The study recommends offering a well-planned support programme covering the available resources and services, paying special attention to the use of e-resources, online catalogue, e-mail and social media for their academic purposes.

Keywords: School library; Social media; Information sources; Law students; Sri Lanka

Introduction

Every year, about three hundred students who complete their secondary school education enter the Law stream at the Universities of Colombo (UoC) and Peradeniya (UoP). Majority of them come from the government schools. These new entrants do not get an opportunity to study any Law-related subjects or to develop skills in accessing Law-related information during their secondary school education. Further, the massive volume of information and technologies in the university library overwhelm the new students who have no prior exposure to such advanced libraries in their schools.

Prior knowledge and skills in the use of a library during the school education have positive influence on undergraduate library use¹. Majority of freshmen find it difficult to effectively search academic library portals, read and comprehend scholarly materials and have trouble understanding faculty expectations for course assignments and many freshmen are unfamiliar with academic libraries².

New entrants need strong academic support from the university library to develop their information skills. To design such programmes, it is vital for the librarians to understand the previous information seeking practices of the students. Their use of the school library and various other information sources for their academic work; their experience in using computers to search for information; and the use of social media are

some factors that can affect the information seeking experiences once they enter the university. Studies in the pre-university information seeking trends of the Sri Lankan Law Course entrants are scarce and this study attempts to fill that gap in the literature.

Review of literature

According to survey by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 1995, 70% of the government schools (excluding schools in North-East Province), did not have school libraries and the existing libraries had various issues; including lack of a school library policy, inadequate management infrastructure, lack of appreciation of the reading habits by the teachers, lack of resources and trained library staff, poor image of the library staff and lack of support by the principal or teachers³. This status was further confirmed in 1998 and highlighted that the rural schools suffered more than the urban schools⁴. General Education Project – Phase 2 (GEP2), was initiated by the MOE with World Bank funding to address these issues. A complete restructuring of the school library sector was planned including establishment of a School Library Development Unit (SLDU) within the MOE to develop required policies, and to develop infrastructure and resources in 4000 selected school libraries throughout the country, as well as the establishment of the National Institute of Library & Information Sciences to train the library staff.³

There is a dearth of follow-up studies on the project except one study which comments that the school libraries lack qualified human resources, and the library responsibilities are discharged by the teachers, clerical staff or volunteers with no proper training⁵. They lack sufficient funds, resources, and infrastructure. Library policies and clear standards are absent in these libraries⁵. Under these circumstances the libraries in government schools, cannot expect to prepare the students to face the rather sophisticated university library systems.

According to Department of Census and Statistics⁶, computer literacy of Sri Lanka is 28.3% while the digital literacy rate is 33.7%. Distribution of Internet and email as a percentage of household population are 21.3% and 11.0% respectively⁶. Accordingly, it is difficult to presume that all course entrants are ardent users of Internet or email.

Social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allows the creation and exchange of user generated content”⁷. Social media are very often used by 33.9% of the students, especially to help their study process⁸. All students use social media for personal interaction or communication, and learning, and the relevance of social media to undergraduates’ academic purposes vary and especially increases during the examination periods or when nearing the assignments’ deadlines⁹.

Students use social networking sites mostly to interact with friends, connecting with classmates for online study and for discussing serious national issues, and there are benefits as well as dangers of using social networking sites^{10,11}.

The undergraduates use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for entertainment, education/information, however the use of social media reduces the time they devote for studies¹². About 90% use Facebook and other social media to exchange academic activities, developing social networks and to share learning experiences with their colleagues and international community.¹³

The use of ICT by the new entrants is increasing and the majority frequently uses word processing (92.2%), spreadsheets (85.7%), presentation packages (87.6%), wikis and blogs (92.9%), Internet browsers (92.4%), email (90.9%) and social networking sites (92.7), while Instant and Text Messaging (68.3%) and online games (61.5%) are also popular among them¹⁴. Another study states that 74% have started using

Internet after they turned 15 years of age but only 15% seek help from the library through e-mail, Facebook (2.1%), phone (8.6%) and instant messaging (2.9) and in contrast, 62.9% like to meet the librarians directly¹⁵.

There are 1.2 million Sri Lankan Facebook accounts (although 20% of them are fake accounts) and 43% of the Facebook users are between 18-24 years of age. Many university students use it to connect with friends, study collaboratively, and share information and so on¹⁶.

Studies related to information seeking behavior of Law undergraduates in the national and international contexts are rare, but a study specific to Law undergraduates of the Anuradhapura Regional Centre of the Open University of Sri Lanka¹⁷ claims that 93% of the respondents use e-resources but the majority is unaware of how to use them for their academic work.

A gender-based study^{18,19} of the Law entrants conducted at University of Colombo established that the respondents have e-mail (78.4%), Facebook (52.4%) and Twitter accounts (14.2%), 91.8% is willing to communicate with the library through these media and to receive SMSs from the library (88.7%)¹⁸. The respondents have borrowed books (87%), studied in the library (72.3%), used magazines (40.7%), used the library catalogue (48.5%) and have used computers in the library (25.1%), but Cramer’s V tests have proved there is no statistically significant correlation between the gender of the respondents and these findings¹⁹.

In the light of the above, the current survey attempts to understand the use of school library and select social media by the new entrants to the Law stream in two Sri Lankan universities and their preferences to use these media to communicate with the university library.

Objective of the study

- To investigate the pre-university information seeking trends of the Law Course entrants in Sri Lanka

Methodology

This study is based on 37 responses each received from randomly selected Law course entrants at the University of Colombo and University of Peradeniya. Fisher’s Exact Test (2-sided) was performed to check the variation between the two data sets and it was established that there is no significant difference. Demographic details, use of school library during

Table 1 — Use of the school library

Use of the Library	UoC	%	UoP	%	Total	%	Mean	Std. Dev.	Fisher's Exact Test Sig. (2-sided)
Used the Library	31	84	33	89	64	86	23.31	38.436	.048
Use of the Library facilities									
Borrowed books	31	84	31	84	62	84	6.19	22.340	.045
Used magazines	20	54	19	51	39	53	7.22	24.881	.078
Studied in the library	26	70	32	86	58	78	6.14	22.354	.001
Had a catalogue in the library	20	54	31	84	51	69	6.36	22.308	.000
Used the catalogue to find books	16	43	26	70	42	57	11.27	30.755	.000
Had computers in the library	11	30	10	27	21	28	4.30	19.605	.330
Used computers available in the library	8	22	3	8	11	15	10.85	30.901	.003

Grades 12-13, other sources of information, use of smart phones and select social media and their preferred methods to communicate with the university library were gathered using a close ended structured questionnaire. SPSS (V.22) was used to analyse data and the descriptive values were used to interpret the findings, while Cramer's V tests were used to discover the association between the entities.

Analysis

Respondents' demographics

The majority of the respondents were female (70% in UoC and 81% in UoP) and the total respondents were between 21-22 years (62% in UoC and 59% in UoP). Fisher's Exact Text (2-sided) indicated a value of 0.101 related to gender and a value of 0.133 related to age indicating that there was no significant difference between the UoC and UoP groups.

The respondents of UoC are from Western (24%), Southern (22%), North western (16%), Eastern (8%), Uva (8%), Sabaragamuwa (8%), Northern (5%), North Central (5%), and Central (3%) Provinces. The respondents of UoP are from Northern (49%), Central (11%), North Western (8), Sabaragamuwa (8%), Uva (5%), North Central (5%), Eastern (3%) and Southern (3%) provinces.

Use of the school library

Majority of respondents in both groups have used the school library and have borrowed books from the library (Table 1), but only around half of the respondents from both groups have used magazines from the library. Of the respondents from UoP, 86% have studied in the library while only 70% of the respondents from UoC have studied in the library. While 84% of the respondents from UoP have mentioned that they had a catalogue in the library, only 54% from UoC mentioned that they had a catalogue. A low percentage from both groups claimed that they had

Table 2 — Association between the use of school library and the province and gender of the respondents

Use of the Library	Cramer's V Value			
	Province		Gender	
	UoC	UoP	UoC	UoP
Used the Library	.337	.816	.122	.139
Use of the Library facilities				
Borrowed books	.404	.693	.185	.408
Used Magazines	.320	.437	.227	.286
Studied in the Library	.415	.472	.161	.112
Had a Catalogue in the Library	.401	.518	.297	.425
Used the Catalogue to find books	.437	.370	.177	.170
Had computers in the library	.327	.469	.097	.174
Used computers available in the library	.310	.372	.081	.175

computers in the library, but 22% from UoC has used it against 8% from UoP.

Table 2 shows the association between the use of school library and its facilities and the province and gender. A strong association is shown between the province and use of the library in UoP while this is weak in UoC, implying that the relationship between the use of the library and the Province is statistically significant in UoP while this relationship is statistically weak in UoC. There is a moderate association between the use of some library facilities (borrowed books, studied in the library, had a catalogue in the library, and used the catalogue to find books in the library) and the province in UoC.

A moderate association was established in using all library facilities and the province in UoP, except in using the catalogue to find books and using the computers available in the library, where the association is weak. The association between all these aspects and gender is weak in both universities except in the case of borrowing books and having a catalogue in the library and gender in UoP, which is moderate, implying that the use of library facilities does not vary

in a statistically significant manner according to the gender of respondents.

Use of other information sources

Respondents were asked to mention the sources used to obtain information other than the school library. In the UoC, book shops (81%), tuition classes (68%), friends (57%) and Internet (46%) as the most frequent sources. In the UoP, book shops (70%), friends (30%) and tuition classes (30%) are the most used but the use of Internet is significantly low (3%). Use of the Public library is low among both groups, but among UoC respondents this is higher (30%) than that of the respondents from UoP (11%).

Table 3 depicts the association between the use of other information sources and the province and gender. The association between the use of other sources and province in UoC is moderate in all cases except in purchasing from bookshops, which is weak. The association between the sources and the province in UoP also shows a moderate association with the exception of obtaining from friends, which is weak. This implies that the use of information sources does not vary significantly according to the provinces of the respondents. It was also established that the association between gender and the use of other information sources is weak in both universities implying that the use of other information sources does not vary according to the gender of respondents.

Use of smart phones, select social media

Table 4 illustrates that 81% from UoC and 41% from UoP have smart phones. Of the respondents, 57% from UoC and 35% from UoP have FB accounts but few have Twitter accounts (11% of UoC and 5% of UoP). Skype was slightly popular than Twitter and 32% from UoC and 16% from UoP have Skype accounts, 76% from UoC and 41% from UoP have e-mail accounts. The majority from UoC (89%) expressed that they are willing to communicate with

the university library through these media while only 51% from UoP agreed. Of the respondents 86% from UoC and 70% from UoP stated that they would like to receive information as short messages (SMS) from the library. These findings illustrated a considerable difference in the access to smart phones, select social media and emails between the respondents from the two groups. A higher percentage of respondents from UoC have access to these devices, media and email than the respondents from UoP. Similarly, a higher percentage from UoC was willing to interact with the library using these media.

Cramer's V tests show (Table 5) that all the above aspects of the UoC group depicted a weak association with the province, except having an email account, which showed a moderate association. This implies that the province of respondents of UoC does not have a statistically significant relationship to the communication media other than in the use of e-mail. In UoP, while others aspects had a weak association, having Facebook, Skype and email accounts depicted a moderate association with the province implying that possession of these accounts has a statistically significant relationship with the province. In both universities gender depicted a weak association with all the aspects implying that the use communication media and preferences do not vary according to the gender of respondents.

Table 3 — Association between the use of other information sources and the province and gender of the respondents

Information sources	Cramer's V Value			
	Province		Gender	
	UoC	UoP	UoC	UoP
Purchased from book shops	.374	.469	.233	.145
Obtained from friends	.519	.283	.214	.184
Received from Tuition class	.506	.487	.303	.321
Obtained from Internet	.525	.414	.221	.302
Obtained from Public Library	.625	.492	.242	.319
Used other sources	.607	.557	.231	.321

Table 4 — Use of smart phones, select social media and preferences to use them to communicate with the library

Communication Media & Preferences	UoC	%	UoP	%	Total	%	Mean	Std. Dev.	Fisher's Exact Test Sig. (2-sided)
Have a Smart Phone	30	81	15	41	45	61	2.70	11.358	.001
Have a Facebook account	21	57	13	35	29	39	2.85	11.341	.102
Have a Twitter account	4	11	2	5	6	8	5.85	19.280	.181
Have a Skype account	12	32	6	16	18	24	4.38	15.884	.115
Have an e-mail Account	28	76	15	41	43	58	1.42	.497	.004
Like to communicate with the Library using the above	33	89	19	51	52	70	5.23	19.412	.001
Like to receive information as SMSs from Library	32	86	26	70	58	78	6.46	19.412	.099

Table 5 — Association between select social media, email and smart phone and the province and gender of the respondents

Communication Media & Preferences	Cramer's V Value			
	Province		Gender	
	UoC	UoP	UoC	UoP
Have a smart phone	.290	.341	.182	.181
Have a FB account	.350	.440	.217	.165
Have a Twitter Account	.290	.299	.359	.318
Have Skype Account	.366	.486	.148	.256
Have an e-mail Account	.469	.561	.184	.290
Like to communicate with the Library using the above	.376	.371	.174	.244
Like to receive information as SMSs from Library	.377	.374	.255	.267

Discussion

It was found that the undergraduates from both groups have used the school library facilities but the availability of computers and use of computers in their school libraries are low in both the groups. However, considering the status of school libraries in Sri Lanka^{4, 5}, it is hard to believe that they have had opportunities to develop information seeking skills needed for university education through their school libraries. Other than the school library, the majority from both groups has purchased the required material from bookshops but their use of other sources varies. Use of other sources by the UoP group is less and their use of the Internet is very low compared to the UoC group. This indicates that the UoP group may not have developed adequate skills in using the Internet for searching academic materials which can affect their use of e-resources within the university, in conformity with Karunarathne's¹⁸ findings. The study confirmed that UoC group was ahead of the UoP group. The low figures conform to the findings of Mashroofa¹⁶ and Karunarathne¹⁸ but significantly lower than that studied by Kumara¹⁵. This could be due to a difference in the subject stream as the later study¹⁵ proved that those in the Faculty of IT reported a higher use than those from the other two faculties. Majority of those who enter the Law stream are from the GCE/AL Arts stream.

Conclusion

According to the findings, those who enter the Law stream in both universities will benefit from training in using the university library for their academic purposes. A well-planned programme covering the resources and services with a special attention to the e-resources and online catalogue need to be offered. Both groups need an exposure to the use of e-mail and

social media for their academic purposes, but those who enter the Law stream at UoP needs more training than their counterparts at UoC. Since the majority of respondents from UoC are willing to communicate with the library through the social media, the library must consider expanding their communication with the students in to such media, in addition to the traditional paper and web-based communication. However, considering the negative effects¹⁶ of social media on academic performance, students need to be guided appropriately in using the social media in a responsible manner.

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