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Investigation on Virtual Reference Services (VRS) provided by selected Universities from Tamil Nadu

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Abstract:

With the advancement of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) development is taking place at a rapid rate. Hence in order to stay in the limelight one must keep themselves updated with the latest technological trend. This chapter focuses on the Virtual Reference Service (VRS) provided by eight universities from Tamil Nadu. Various services that can be provided under VRS have been identified based on minimal cost and maximum benefit approach. We have made a comparison of these Universities right from their NAAC grade to NIRF ranking 2019 and eventually the VRS. The amount of funds utilized has also been discussed in comparison to their ranking received. Based on this study one can get a clear idea about the status of VRS provided by these universities.

Keywords:

Information Communication and Technology, Technological trend, Minimal cost, Maximum benefit approach, Virtual Reference Service, NAAC, NIRF ranking.

1. Introduction:

Reference service has existed for a long time in Libraries. However due to the advancement of Information communication and technology (ICT) the nature of reference service has developed over the years. With the evolution of internet that has occupied the means so as to provide information 24*7. It has created a drastic change to transform traditional library to virtual library where the traditional reference services has been upgraded into Virtual reference services (VRS).

1.1. Need for Virtual Reference Services:

The library reference desks need to change their mode of operation as more and more users are hooked to the web for their queries. Several sites have come up providing commercial reference services like AskJeeves and WebHelp that allow users to ask questions and receive free answers for public information available on the web. This proves their increasing demand for online reference assistance. However their quality of services cannot be with that of a reference librarian.

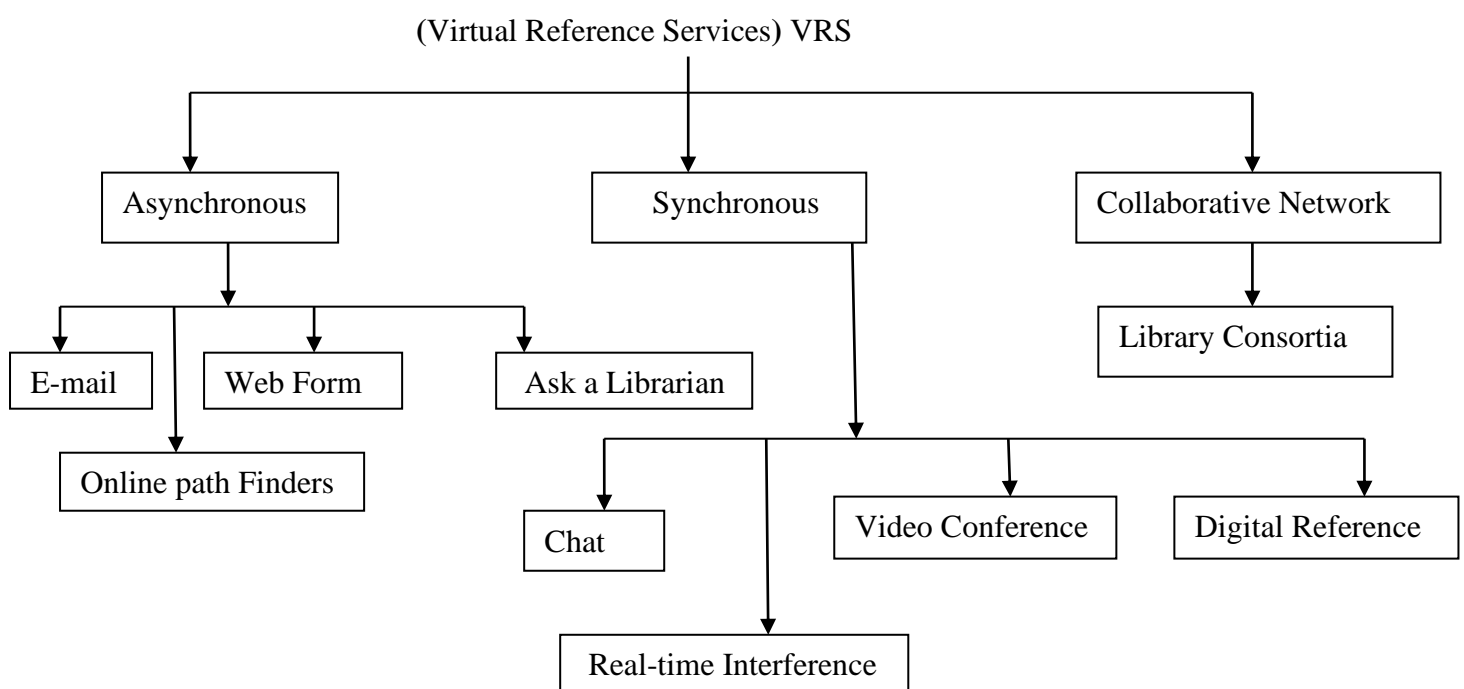
Hence libraries can adopt such technologies to enhance their way of providing services. Several interactive customer services provide online reference via eGain, Cisco's customer contact solutions, LivePerson, WebHelp and Humanclick. These services are dedicated to a wide range of audience hence the libraries must also think upon and provide service to a diverse range of user community.

1.2. Elements of Virtual Reference Services:

VRS consists of the following primary elements;

- a) The Clientele: refers to the user who is in need of information.
- b) The Channel: can be the means of communication such as e-mail, chat, web forms
- c) The Resource: refers to documents which can vary from print to electronic format.
- d) The information professional: refers to the individual who is accountable for providing the information.

1.3. Modes of Virtual Reference Services:



1.3.1. Asynchronous Transaction

There is a delay in answering the question. Some of the examples are mentioned above.

1.3.2. Synchronous Transaction

This transaction takes place in "real time" where an instantaneous solution is provided in response to a query. Here are some of the examples such as

1.3.3. Collaborative Networks

Here many libraries collaborate to provide services such as the collaborative digital reference service (CDRS) started by Library of Congress that directs questions to partner institutions based on the profile of members.

2. Review of Literature:

2.1. Khobragade and lihitkar (2016) conducted a user study on the present scenario of VRS provided by IIT libraries. They found that most of the IIT library users rated their ease of accessing VRS. Around 29.19% users were satisfied with the VRS provided by the library. VRS are initiated in real time where users interact with library staff electronically.

2.2. Qobose and Molognayi (2015) presented a case study to determine the utilisation of question point and ask a librarian service based on the response received from the students and librarians at university of Botswana library.

2.3. Shaw and Spink (2009) examined some of the issues and identified best practices for university library virtual reference services related to the use of chat and email service. The provision of services in collaboration with training services by the staff. They recommended that evaluation of online chat and email services along with FAQ can be most effective VRS to maintain the effectiveness of the cost incurred.

2.4. Bakker (2002) concluded that traditional and digital reference services are not completely different. In each context the librarian assists the users in solving his query whether the user is at the reference desk or miles away. He suggested that quality virtual reference services should be offered instead of straight forward answers. VRS should offer supporting resources and information rather than providing direct answers.

3. Objectives of the Study:

The following objectives have been defined for the intended study;

- 3.1. To highlight the universities of Tamil Nadu based on NIRF score and ranking, 2019.
- 3.2. To compare the amount of funds received for University Libraries over three years.
- 3.3. To check the University websites for the services provided to users under VRS.
- 3.4. To identify the VRS provided by the selected Universities of Tamil Nadu.

3.5. To evaluate the VRS provided by universities based on allotted library funding.

3.6. To identify the university providing foremost VRS within the stipulated funding.

4. Methodology:

The present study was conducted on Virtual Reference Services provided by the Universities of Tamil Nadu. Now there are 29 Universities in Tamil Nadu as per UGC website on 20-11-2019. We further limited our study on 8 Universities from Tamil Nadu based on National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) ranking 2019 of the top 100 Universities. We have selected these 8 universities in order to make a uniform assessment among them. However we have not selected deemed to be universities, agricultural universities, technical institutes and kept our focus on Institutions with university stature. The selected Universities have been assigned with certain code for our ease of use in this study.

Anna University (ANU), Bharathiar University (BRU), University of Madras (UOM), Alagappa University (ALU), Madurai Kamaraj University (MKU), Bharathidasan University (BDU), Periyar University (PRU) and Manonmaniam Sundaranar University (MSU).

An investigation was done to browse through the websites of respective Universities. There are many VRS provided by Institutions but we have zeroed down on few services that are of prime importance with respect to minimal cost and maximum benefit approach. We have assigned the VRS certain code for their ease of use during this study.

Ask a librarian (AL), Contact us (CU), Hyperlink for library (HL), Site map (SM), Search Report (SR), News Group (NG), Feed Back (FD), Suggestions (SG), Blogs (BL), library mobile app (LM), Facebook (FB), Frequently asked questions (FAQ), Qwerty code @ library (QR), Linkedin (LI), Instagram (IM), Online Chat Service (OCS), Real simple syndication feed (RSS), Twitter (TWT), YouTube (YT).

5. Analysis:

Table 5.1. Selected universities from Tamil Nadu

Sl. No.	University Name	Established Year	Uniform Resource Locator (URL)	NAAC Grade
1.	ANU	1978	https://www.annauniv.edu/	A
2.	BRU	1982	https://www.b-u.ac.in/	A
3.	UOM	1857	https://www.unom.ac.in/	A
4.	ALU	1985	https://alagappauniversity.ac.in/	A+
5.	MKU	1966	https://mkuniversity.ac.in/new/index	A
6.	BDU	1982	http://www.bdu.ac.in/	A+
7.	PRU	1997	https://www.periyaruniversity.ac.in/	A
8.	MSU	1990	https://www.msuniv.ac.in/	A

Source: *Secondary data* (NAAC- National Assessment and Accreditation Council)

Table 5.1 depicts that UOM occupies the first position based on their year of establishment. However the NAAC grading of UOM is A which is less than ALU and BDU who have A+. NAAC grading is based on seven criteria namely;

- a) Curricular Aspects
- b) Teaching-learning and evaluation
- c) Research, consultancy and extension
- d) Infrastructure and learning resources
- e) Student support and progression
- f) Governance, Leadership and Management
- g) Innovations and Best Practices for assessing Higher Educational Institutions (HEI)

There are eight types of grades ranging from A++, A+, A, B++, B+, B, C and D where A++ denotes the highest grade with Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) ranging between 3.76 and 4.00 whereas HEI obtaining 1.5 or less CGPA are not graded by NAAC. This type of grading pattern creates a positive atmosphere among HEI to compete and maintain better standards. The website security of all the universities are secured except that of BDU who has A+ grade. The security certificate of a website must be ensured because attackers can easily misuse sensitive information entered on the website for official purpose. One can easily observe the difference here secured websites have 'https' where 's' stands for secure and 'http' denotes unsecured websites.

Table 5.2. Selection of Universities from Tamil Nadu based on NIRF Ranking 2019:

Sl. No.	University	NIRF Score	NIRF Rank
1.	ANU	60.35	7
2.	BRU	57.23	14
3.	UOM	51.34	20
4.	ALU	48.54	28
5.	MKU	45.20	45
6.	BDU	43.41	60
7.	PRU	40.99	68
8.	MSU	38.76	93

Source: *Secondary data* (NIRF- National Institutional Ranking Framework)

From the above table we can observe the score and ranking of the selected universities specified by NIRF. NIRF rankings are based on parameters such as;

- a) teaching, learning and resources where the student faculty ratio is compared with the amount of money allotted and if utilised then for what purpose.
- b) research and professional practice defines the number of publications and project borne by faculty members.

c) Graduation Outcome monitors the performance of students.

d) Outreach of student considers the diverse number of disabled and female students enrolled.

e) Awareness focuses on need based orientation of research.

Now the ranking varies on the basis of score obtained from these parameters. We can very well compare the VRS provided by the universities based on their NIRF ranking.

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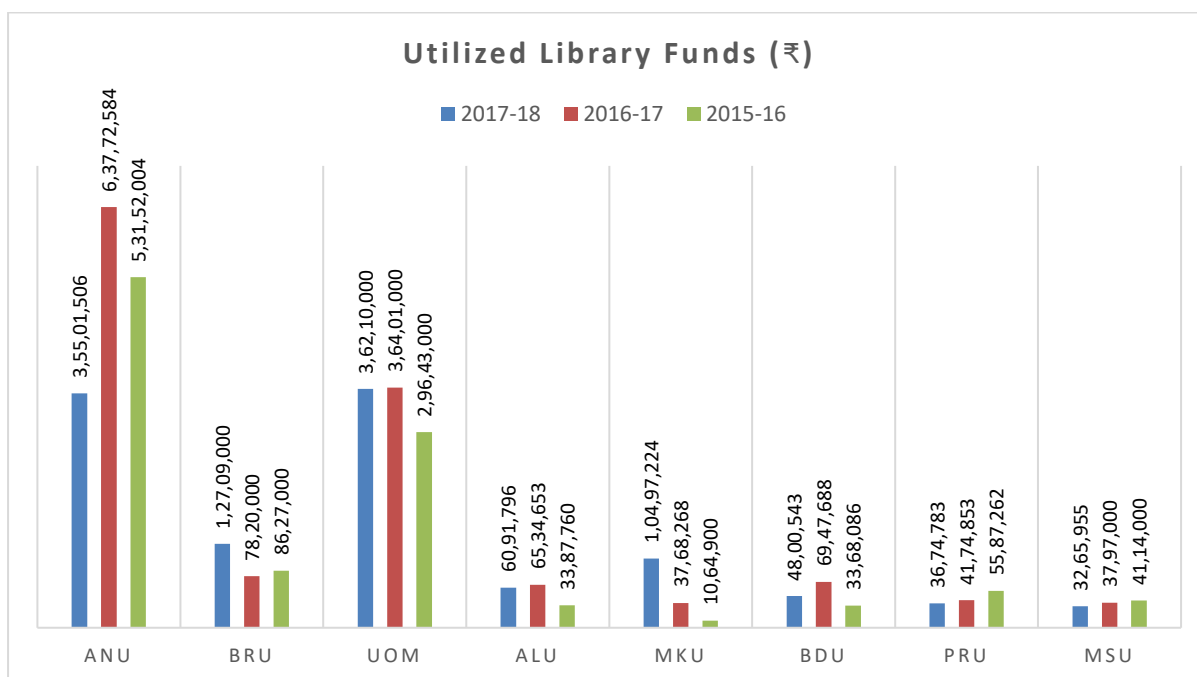
Table 5.3. Library funds utilised over a period of three years

Sl. No.	University	Utilized Library Funds (Rs.)		
		(2017-18)	(2016-17)	(2015-16)
1.	ANU	3,55,01,506 (Three crore fifty five lakh one thousand five hundred and six)	6,37,72,584 (six crore thirty seven lakh seventy two thousand five hundred and eighty four)	5,31,52,004 (Five crore thirty one lakh fifty two thousand and four)
2.	BRU	1,27,09,000 (One crore Twenty Seven Lakh Nine Thousands only)	78,20,000 (Seventy Eight Lakh Twenty Thousands only)	86,27,000 (Eighty Six Lakh Twenty Seven Thousands only)
3.	UOM	3,62,10,000(Three crore sixty two lakh ten thousand only)	3,64,01,000 (Three crore sixty four lakh one thousand only)	2,96,43,000(Two crore ninety six lakh forty three thousand only)
4.	ALU	60,91,796 (Sixty Lakh Ninety One Thousand Seven Hundred and Ninety Six)	65,34,653 (Sixty Five Lakh Thirty Four Thousand Six Hundred and Fifty Three)	33,87,760 (Thirty Three Lakh Eighty Seven Thousand Seven Hundred and Sixty)
5.	MKU	1,04,97,224 (One crore Four Lakh Ninety Seven Thousand Two Hundred and Twenty Four)	37,68,268 (Thirty Seven Lakh Sixty Eight Thousand Two Hundred and Sixty Eight)	10,64,900 (Ten Lakh Sixty Four Thousand Nine Hundred)
6.	BDU	48,00,543 (Forty Eight Lakh Five Hundred Forty Three)	69,47,688 (Sixty Nine Lakh Forty Seven Thousand Six Hundred Eighty Eight)	33,68,086 (Thirty Three Lakh Sixty Eight Thousand Eighty Six)
7.	PRU	36,74,783 (Thirty six lakh seventy four thousand seven hundred and eighty three only)	41,74,853 (Rupees Forty one lakh seventy four thousand eight)	55,87,262 (Rupees Fifty five lakh eighty seven thousand two hundred sixty two)

			hundred fifty three only)	only)
8.	MSU	32,65,955 (Thirty Two Lakh Sixty Five Thousand Nine Hundred and Fifty Five Only)	37,97,000 (Thirty Seven Lakh Ninety Seven Thousand Seven Only)	41,14,000 (Rupees Forty One Lakh and Fourteen Thousand Only)

Source: *Secondary data*

Anna University (ANU), Bharathiar University (BRU), University of Madras (UOM), Alagappa University (ALU), Madurai Kamaraj University (MKU), Bharathidasan University (BDU), Periyar University (PRU) and Manonmaniam Sundaranar University (MSU).



Source: *Secondary data*

Now in order to implement any service in a library funding is an important aspect. However the funding amounts are not constant and vary over the years. It completely vests on the interest of the library professional to utilise the sanctioned amount in a manner such that the library services generate a major contribution in the overall development of the academic institution. The amount of fund sanctioned to a library varies over the year. Hence decisions should be such that each and every individual be it a student or a faculty should benefit from the services implemented by the library. Here we will only focus on VRS because users do not need to be physically present in the library to utilise its services. Hence in order to keep in touch with the users we need to focus our concern on implementing such VRS. Here can see that the amount utilised by Anna University (ANU) has decreased by almost 50% over the past two years. There is a constant decrease in the utilised amount over the period of three years. Bharathiar University (BRU) has increased their utilised amount for the past two years. University of Madras (UOM) has maintained a constant amount over the previous two years. Alagappa University (ALU) has merely doubled their library spending from 2015-16 to 2016-17 and decreased by 7.27% over the previous year. Madurai Kamaraj University (MKU) has

increased their library utilisation fund by a huge margin going from 38 lakh (approx) to 1 crore. Bharathidasan University (BDU) has increased and decreased the amount over a three year period. Periyar University (PRU) and Manonmaniam Sundaranar University (MSU) has significantly decreased their utilisation amount consistently over three years.

Table 5.4. **VRS offered at the universities**

Sl. No.	University Name	Virtual reference services (VRS)
1.	ANU	CN, CU, HL, SM, SR, WM
2.	BRU	CN, CU, HL, SR, LM, FB, NG, FAQ, TWT , WM
3.	UOM	CN, CU, HL, SR, WM
4.	ALU	CN, CU, HL, SM, SR,LM, FD, SG, FB, FAQ, RSS, NG
5.	MKU	CN, CU, HL, SM, SR, TWT, YT, FAQ, FB
6.	BDU	CN, CU, HL, SM, SR, LM, QR, OCS
7.	PRU	CN, CU, HL, SM, FAQ, WM
8.	MSU	CN, CU, HL, SM, SR, BL, YT, WM

Source: *Secondary data*

Ask a librarian (AL), Contact number (CN), Contact us (CU), Hyperlink for library (HL), Site map (SM), Search Report (SR), News Group (NG), Feed Back (FD), Suggestions (SG), Blogs (BL), library mobile app (LM), Facebook (FB), Frequently asked questions (FAQ), Qwerty code @ library (QR), Linkedin (LI), Instagram (IM), Online Chat Service (OCS), Real simple syndication feed (RSS), Twitter (TWT), YouTube (YT), Web Mail (WM).

6. Interpretation:

We can well observe the amount of funding that is utilized by the libraries. Again we can notice a huge drop in the library spending compared to previous years. However few universities have increased their utilization by a negligible amount. Now the factor that should be kept in mind is to provide optimum services within the assigned amount. Hence Librarians must ensure that the services are not only utilised but the users must also benefit from these services. Hence in order to do that VRS can be a game changer to keep users attracted to the services provided by the library. Hence we can also relate the NAAC grades of the university along with the NIRF ranking followed by the VRS services.

7. Findings:

7.1. Anna University has provided some of the basic services. In spite of utilising a whopping amount as library funds they failed to exploit the utility of social networking tools.

7.2. Bharathiar University more or less made use of social media tools like facebook and twitter along with some of the basic services.

7.3. In spite of being first established, University of Madras has failed to maintain its standard in providing VRS. It is also considered to be a University with potential excellence (UPE). There is no application of social media along with site map of the university.

7.4. Alagappa University is equipped with a lot of services to make it easier for the users to access. However their hyperlink for facebook and RSS feed was not working.

7.5. Madurai Kamaraj University also made use of most of the services along with twitter but failed to provide with a feedback and suggestion option.

7.6. Bharathidasan University also has no mention of social media. However they have provided an online chat service in real time.

7.7. Periyar University also provides few services lacking the use of social media to connect to its users.

7.8. Manonmaniam Sundaranar University made use of blogging and YouTube to stay in touch with its latest happenings. However YouTube videos are not updated frequently.

It was very astonishing to find that none of the universities provided Ask a librarian (AL) service which can be considered at a minimal cost. The output will obviously be maximum in this case because the Librarian can effectively guide users to their specific source of information.

8. Discussion:

Now from the above study we can see that majority of the universities have failed to implement VRS. It is not always the amount of funding that is required to provide services in the library. Librarians need to acknowledge a broader vision of mind so that they can provide better services at minimal cost. Libraries need to stay in touch with the users in real time so that the users make utmost utilization of the services provided by a library. Now libraries cannot assure in increasing user footfall all of a sudden. Library professionals need to gear up their services in order to maintain and build their trust within the academic fraternity. More and more thought must be given on this matter because the behavior of the user is changing day by day. Users need to have that faith on information professionals by making maximum use of the resources available in the library. Visiting the library is a need based service hence that need should be such that users must completely rely on. Scaling up the interoperability of the unrestricted, infinite and endless information sources, Virtual reference service can not only act as a boon to users but also to the libraries in this digital era.

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