
Information needs and information use: a research based on Social Scientists at the Open University of Sri Lanka.

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Abstract

This study focuses on the information needs, use of resources by required by academics of the Social Sciences Department at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). The questionnaire and interview were used as instruments in this study to collect data. The response rate was 100% due to higher cooperation. A

conceptual model was used to identify and assess the information needs of the academic staff. The study revealed that the multiple role of OUSL academic in the distance mode is different to that of an academic in the conventional setup hence their information needs are different. Academic in the distance mode depends heavily on the Internet, text books and subject journals as their major sources of information to fulfill their different needs. OUSL main library is used for writing and to revising course materials. Research needs are mainly fulfilled through special libraries in the country. Main obstacle that they face is getting sufficient materials in their specialized subject areas. Therefore, both printed and electronic collection of the OUSL library must be strengthened to meet the specific research needs of the academic staff members.

Key words: Information needs - Social scientists, Library usage, Teaching - higher education, Distance education system, Academic staff needs,

Introduction:

Library is one of the many agencies that plays an important role in spreading the knowledge. The main objective of the library is to disseminate the right information at the right time to right reader. Today, information has become a resource as people cannot live without information. Due to that information has taken an important place in the modern world. Information providers and resources are in a process of rapid change in the field of information science. The user is considered as the person who has information needs and willingness to search for that

complicated situation creates a favourable, psychological state. This state includes self-confidence, enthusiasm, patience, perseverance, imagination, willingness, interest, curiosity, flexibility, frustration, happiness, phobia, belief, success and values etc. These psychological variables are the "outlook on life structure" of the individuals.

Information Need Identification (INI) Model:

At the literature search, researcher found different models that can be used to identify different information needs. Out of those models, following conceptual model which describes the process of identification of information needs, introduced by Devadason and Lingam was selected to use this study to understand the information needs of the OUSL academic staff needs. The model given in figure 0, below emphasizes the 6 step process that is necessary to follow in understanding the information needs.

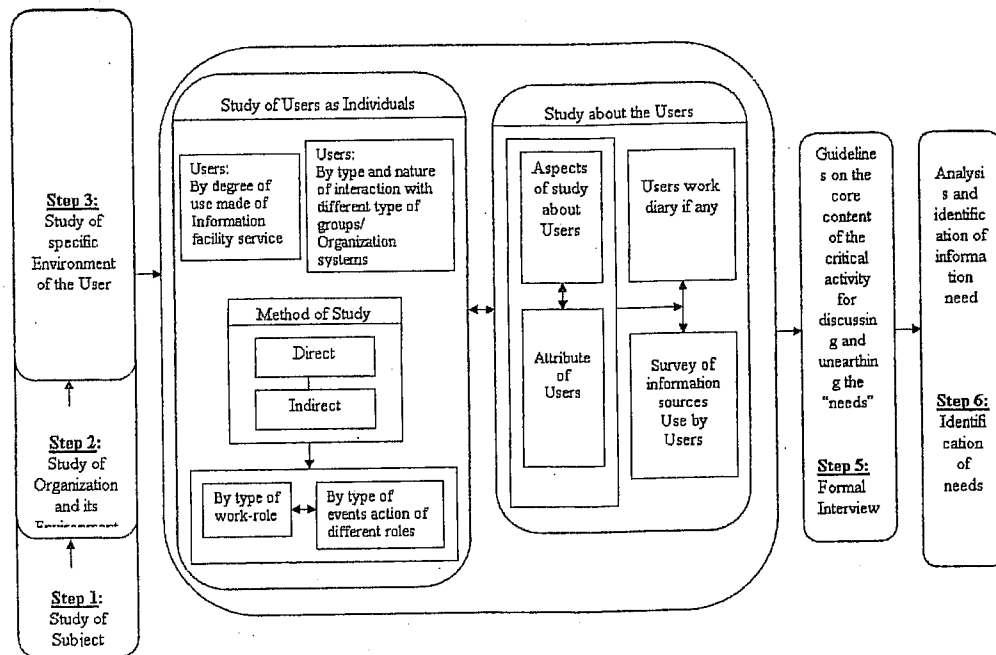
information, particularly from libraries. These changes are clearly visible and noticeable in the behavioural patterns of the users. The way the users search for their needs is the mode of access. This mode may be a direct search, the user mediated by the librarian or library system. Hence, identification of the nature of the information needs and the affected variables of those needs is a significant part of the professional role. Therefore, there is an urgent need to understand the complex process of 'identifying information needs' which is a vital link in the chain of operations from information gathering to dissemination. Lack of understanding of the different information needs of the users is one of the crucial problems of information providers. As a researcher, identifying the vague nature of the user's information needs is an important study. Well-understood user needs, are essential in a society where we can see and explore information.

In this respect, from time to time, studying the users' complexity of information needs has emerged as a current development in the field of library and information science research. Understanding the user needs through a study of that nature will pave the way to design either a new information system or ameliorate the existing systems in the interest of the users' perspectives.

Rowley defines information need as " a need is generally conceived as describing what an individual ought to have, for his work, edification, recreation etc. Pin pointing a need implies value judgment: one person may regard a piece of information as vital. While another, in the same situation, may attain the same goal without it, (Rowley, 1978)

When information, is needed, there will be a conflict in one's mind with a series of questions such as what, where, how and when. This

Figure 0: A conceptual model of process of identification of information needs



Source: Devadason, 1997

The six steps that describes the above model are

- Step1 - Study the subjects interest of the organization and preparation of handbook
- Step2 - Study the organization and its environment and prepare a profile of the organization,
- Step3 - Study the specific, immediate environment of the user,
- Step4 - Study of the user,
- Step5 - Formal interview with user,

Step6 - Identification of needs.

Information Need Identification (INI) model helped to find information about the user relating to the following:

- Education, training special expertise
- Foreign language competence
- Responsibilities in the organization
- Membership in committees
- Membership in professional bodies.
- Outside organization with which the user has academic or professional contact.
- Kind of learning media preferred by the user
- Type of information services.

The researcher specifically used 3rd, 4th and 5th steps that describe the above model to find necessary information for this study with the help of user profiles, interviews and questionnaires as the other information is already known to the researcher.

A formal interview schedule was prepared according to the given information in the model, and interviews were conducted with the users, to give an idea of the immediate environment of the users which is described in step 3 of the above model. Hence the researcher could clearly understand which information needs were of high priority, which were actual, which were potential, which were distantly related, which could be dropped or added etc.

Library support for teaching and research:

Core responsibility of the university academics is teaching, and conducting research contributing knowledge. Critical to these two activities, they need to access and use information. Without it no significant teaching, let alone research, can be undertaken. The OUSL library as a service department has put in place a structure and a mechanism for providing academic staff and students, access to resources. The main library coordinates with other libraries at 27 regional and study centers all over the island, by sending processed reading materials, introducing rules and regulations of members and giving guidance. These libraries work as a team to ensure consistency in the standard of services offered to all academic departments at main campus as well as at regional centres.

Main library keeps contact and liaison which is maintained through direct contact with the faculty by representing faculty board meetings, distribution of e-bulletins and emailing of relevant resources and information. The main purpose of this exercise is to enable the faculty librarian to become familiar with the curriculum and research needs of the concerned departments. Llull (1991) had pointed out that "... it is important that librarian be assigned to specific departments in order to develop the understanding and skills to address specific discipline's... needs, online searching and material access requirements (Llull,1991). Further, Library has recognized their specific area of research interests through their profiles. Information acquired are matched with the profiles and are sent to them through the SDI service. The main purpose of these representations is to recognize the key role of the faculty librarian that has to play when supporting their teaching and learning activities.

Lipow also had identified four reasons why connectivity is important for librarians to work with the faculty.

- Firstly there are new bibliographic concepts to be learned and faculty must learn them if they are to be successful information seekers,
- The faculty as a group are information seekers
- They are an important group next to students
- Working with faculty plays a crucial part in our changing role as professionals in the changing information industry. (Lipow, 1992)

Further, the OUSL belongs to the single mode category of distance education and its students have, no ready access to campus facilities. That means they present a different challenge to the university education provider than they do on conventional provider. Therefore, as pointed out by Lipow and Lull deep understanding between library and academics should be maintained to support their teaching activities.

OUSL library has a clear understanding about the academic activities done by the Social Studies Department and its academic support staff as well as their student population who are registered to any of the courses, from certificate to master's degree level. The text material collection is totally developed to suite the curriculum of the courses conducted by the university. Accordingly, library also updates its resources in three major disciplines such as Mass communication, Economics and Sociology. Adequate resources in the library are a must for the academic staff to

write and revise self-learning materials, which enables the students to study at a distance.

Within this learning sphere, it is seen that both students and academic staff are burdened with academic activities and are spending considerable time on information seeking to accomplish teaching and learning tasks. Unlike in conventional learning situations, information seeking for the learning purposes, ODL model cannot be performed in a leisurely manner, as all the learning contracts are to be performed within a limited time frame. Both teachers and students face difficulties in finding correct and relevant information blocks within the limited time frame.

Objectives of the study:

Within that environment it was assumed that OUSL academic staff has a definite need to look for information. The specific objectives of this study are to;

- identify information needs of the Social scientists of the OUSL academic staff,
- identify reasons why they seek information,
- find out what are the resources they need to use,
- determine the future directions to improve library collection and to improve facilities for social scientists.

Research methodology:

Survey method was used to collect data from the academic staff. Structured questionnaire and interview were the adapted tools to get data on information needs in this study. Interviews were conducted to understand specific academic information needs. The SPSS program was used to get the frequencies, percentages which formed the basis of data analysis.

Research findings and discussion:

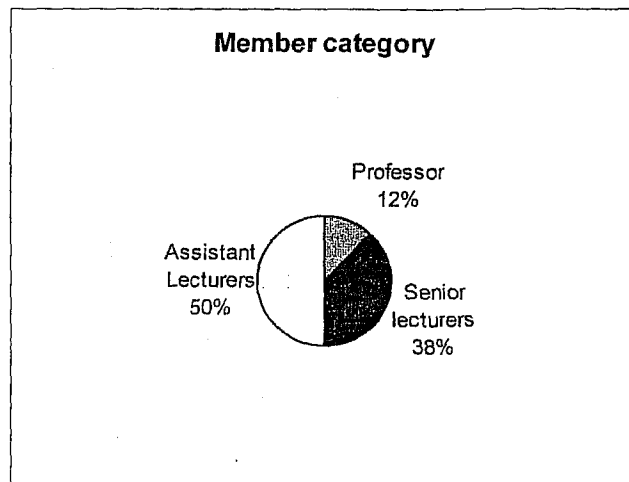
The study population:

All (14) academic members in the department were selected as sample and their response rate was 100%.

Member category:

The participants were from variety of categories, like senior professor, professor etc. It was necessary to find out the background of users that influenced their need for specific information and the tasks they performed that required information. As shown in the figure 1, among the respondents 50% of them were Assistant lecturers, 38% of them were Senior lecturers, and 12% of them were professors.

Figure 1: Member category



Out of total, 43% had a basic degree and 22% had completed Masters Degree and 35% had PhDs. There were two members who had over 15 years of teaching experience, among respondents. There were two academics that had over ten years of teaching experience while one member had over 5 years and others were young and had less than 5 years of teaching experience.

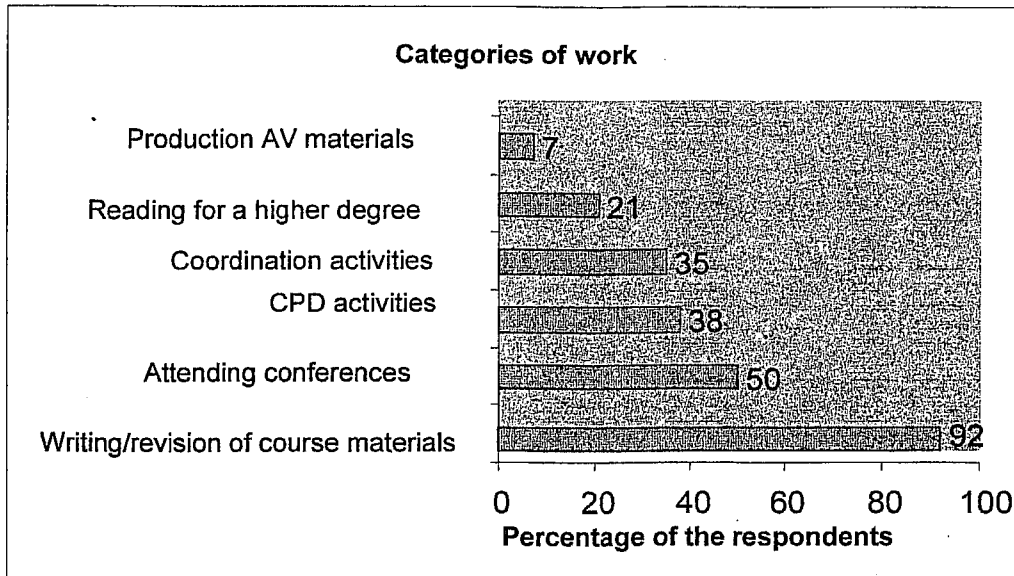
Why academic staff needs information

Information needs of the social scientist academics can be assessed by identifying the purpose of seeking behaviour. This is a common concept used for user studies. Information seeking is a contextualized process of constructing and understanding from an initial state of uncertainty. Seeking pattern is based on the needs that associate with the search process and the actions of seeking and using sources. It incorporates with three major components such as the affective (feeling), the

cognition (thoughts) and the physical search (action and strategies) (Kuhlthau, 1991-2004).

The questionnaire had a query to get information on other activities that they engage while teaching and conducting research. According to the Work norms for OUSL teachers, the main duty of the academic staff who engage in distance mode teaching is to write and revise course materials. The nature of duties assigned to academic staff those who are engaged in distance mode teaching and learning are not similar to conventional university teaching. Therefore, it is important to analyse other activities done by them to have a clear idea of real information necessities. Different categories of work that they were engaged in are given below in figure 2.

Figure 2: Categories of work performed by the OUSL academics



According to the above figure, 92% of them were engaged in writing and revision of course materials. One of the duties assigned to OUSL academic staff by the norms for the teachers is;

- 'Every 4 years, every academic should write or carry out major revisions to a minimum of 16 study sessions of course material'. (OUSL norms, 2007)

It is proved in this study that as Taylor mentioned above, on influence of environment to seek information. Because, 92% of them have sought information to write course materials. Writing course materials are done by the distance mode teaching and learning systems. 'Characteristics of the organization' have influenced to OUSL academics when seeking information.

In the same way, other activities such as teaching, conducting research studies, course and programme coordination, and production of AV materials are some of the assigned work to them by the norms. Accordingly, many of them were engaged in professional development activities such as;

50% - attending conferences, workshops etc.

38% - CPD activities, training activities, writing articles, books etc.

35% - engaged in higher studies while 21% of them were engaged in production of AV materials.

As was found in Nairobi (Ocholla,1996), this result could be due to the fact that 50% of staff members are in assistant lecturer grade and they are still working towards developing themselves for senior positions. It is significant that OUSL academic staff has to do management and administrative activities such as conducting of courses and programmes,

counseling etc. This was revealed by most of them at the interview and stated that they have to give priority to administration and management activities than research activities. Therefore, all the respondents have stated that they need information not only to conduct research studies but also to do all the other activities that were assigned to them. These findings reveal that the information need of the social scientists appears to be influenced by the type of work they do.

Where they go to look for information

The respondents were also asked to rank reasons to find where they looked for information. There is sometimes a need to know how our own library compares with other local information sources. Therefore, different options were included to this question, and they are given below in table 1.

Table 1: Information sources used

Information resources	Number	%
Internet	8	57
Refer OUSL library	7	50
Use of personal collections	6	42
Get information from colleagues	5	35
Purchase materials	5	35
Use development agency collections & other libraries	5	35
Use collections belonging to experts in the field	4	28

The majority (57%) indicated that they depend on the Internet. Same situation was revealed by Ocholla in 1996 and Poland in 1991 and have mentioned that there academic staff rarely go to the library. But this study revealed that another 50% have used OUSL library while using other ways to find necessary information. At the interview they mentioned that they first search the internet and then go for other options.

Significant variance is evident, in terms of how frequently department members visited the library. The analysis indicated that 45% of respondents visited library once a week while 23% went when there was a special need. Further, 25% of them visited library once a month while 7% visited once in three months. The main reasons for infrequent use of the OUSL library are that all members are not engaged in writing and revising course materials and are not conducting research activities.

Further analysis, was done to find purposes of visiting the main library. Because, this will enable the library management to decide on reading materials, that are needed by the academic staff of the university. That information will help library staff to improve library facilities and its collection to provide a better service to users. As shown in table 1, 57% of them have visited the library to borrow books, 42% have come to library to read journal articles, 35% have collected information to conduct day school while 21% have visited for leisure reading. It is seen that no one has used research and report collection, British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC) Service and Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) service due to lack of awareness of the availability of these services at the library. This analysis shows that all the staff members have used library to write and revise course materials and not

for research purposes. Further analysis revealed that 75% of them were in favor to have printed resources as they are convenient and easy to access. But 25% of them have used e-resources given through OUSL library website and are interested to have more e-resources.

Use of other libraries

As mentioned earlier, their main reason of coming to OUSL library is to borrow books to write modules. They further mentioned that they used to go to following special institutional libraries to collect information for research studies. They are CENWOR, British Council, Social Scientist Association, Uni. of Colombo, National Library, National Archives, PGIM, PGIA, and SLLAS. In addition to that they have used other development agency collections such as

- UNICEF
- SLIDA
- CIDA and
- UNDP.

As understood by every one, each university library is not in a position to fulfill all information needs of their users as they develop collections according to institutional needs. That is the main reason of introducing of facilities like 'ILL, E-journal consortium, referral service and SDI services.

These findings clearly show that each member has different necessities due to their specialized fields of such as Macro economics, Gender studies, Media studies, and Peace studies etc.. It was revealed at the interview that the users of respective libraries preferred to consult their own institutional library first and then visit other libraries if they failed.

Barriers to information

Information needs are specific to each other which are no exception to university academic staff too. All university libraries in Sri Lanka are not self sufficient with their resources to meet information needs of clients who seek information. OUSL library too cannot fulfill unmet needs of the all academic staff. Academic staff of the Department of Social Studies has revealed the issues and concern that have affected their information seeking behaviour in the following way. 42% of respondents felt that the inadequacy of resources relevant to their specific disciplines at the library was the main barrier. Further 28% of them have indicated that more coordinating and management activities at the department have restricted their time and therefore, they do not come to the library regularly. Distance education entails much work related to administrative co-ordination of course-delivery and student support. It is the OUSL experience that much of this administrative work is thrust upon the academic and academic support staff. (OUSL, 1999). It is significant that OUSL academic staff has to do more administrative and management activities such as head of the department, course coordinator, student counselor, warden, senate member, membership in committees, boards and development of new programmes etc. as given in OUSL norms.

'Collection is dusty', "lack of assistance of the library staff" were the other problems faced by the 26% of teachers. The other comments made by them were collection is not properly organized, periodical collection has no easy access, and staff room is not inviting for them to come and refer materials inside the library.

Discussion and recommendations

In summary, the findings of this short study show that OUSL academic staff needs information to play different roles as a teacher, researcher, and manager as well an administrator etc.

Their main source of information, were Internet, text books, journal, and AV materials. Mainly they seek information at OUSL library and then go for other special libraries. The main barrier to the information is non availability of relevant specific materials in their specialized areas.

Obviously the efficient use of information is particularly important in university academic community. It appears that information seeking of the academic staff of the SSD depends on the type of work they do and the level of information necessity. The findings revealed different use patterns among different units of the staff. Professors and senior lecturers require information for writing research articles while others need information to professional development. It was clearly noticed that they use main library to borrow books to write course materials. It is seen that there is infrequency in visiting library.

Inadequacy of resources relevant to their specific subjects was the main barrier. General practice is sending lists of library materials to library by each department through their head for ordering at the beginning of the each financial year. It is an important matter to find out that whether the lists of materials cover the specific necessities of all staff members in each unit. Therefore, it is important for the Dean of the faculty and heads of each unit, and the Librarian to pay more attention on selection and ordering of library materials. Further, researcher suggests that it is

necessary to study further on academic information needs of each unit, and see that all staff members were represented when preparing lists of library materials for ordering.

It is evident that each university cannot acquire all the information that is needed by its users. Hence, each university needs some collaboration in sharing information. Resource-sharing through inter-lending services between university libraries have to be recognized and there should be a commitment to supply the document when requested. For that, all universities should be unite and compromise like having E-journal consortium. A researcher hopes University Libraries Network (ULIBNET) which is in discussion status at SCOLIS will be another solution for that.

E-recourses are popular among young academics and therefore, it is also necessary to enhance the e-resources collection on sub-specialties areas such as micro economics, gender studies, peace studies etc.

The main source of information is the Internet. But academics are not well aware of different searching techniques and also they are not aware of the different URLs where free authorized information available. Therefore, sometimes it has also become a barrier for them.

Recommendations

1. Findings reveal that information provision, such as collection enhancement, promotion of the services and users training in the use of electronic resources are needed to be improved. Hands on practice sessions should be conducted for the academic staff. Training on

information literacy skills should be conducted to improve the searching skills of the OUSL academics.

2. Collaboration between library and academic departments should be further strengthened. The necessities of academic staff who design and develop course materials were not properly directed to the library. Hence a researcher recommends more closer relationship between both parties as it will help understanding the needs of the course designers.

3. Lack of awareness of available services and facilities have caused low usage of library facilities. Continuous user – education programmes to encourage and promote the use of facilities and services is essential to emphasize the availability of regularly updated information. In addition, the users can be taught to follow the right path to seek and use information effectively and timely. Hands-on practice should be given to academics to find most relevant information from the www.

4. Library staff should be trained to give a courteous and efficient service to the users. Staff at front service should be trained on customer caring.

5. E-journal subscription should be increased in selected subject areas.

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