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INFORMATION LITERACY PROGRAMMES IN MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: AN OBSERVATION

Mohd Sharif Mohd Saad   **A. N. Zainab**
Faculty of Information Studies,   Faculty of Computer Science and Information
Universiti Teknologi MARA ,   Technology, University of Malaya

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ABSTRACT

Information literacy is defined as the ability to recognize information need, identify, evaluate and use information effectively. The user education programmes and activities that promote these abilities is a growing concern among librarians and those involved in the education and training sectors. The paper discusses the effort initiated by selected Malaysian public university libraries to promote information literacy skills among their users especially in terms of the objectives, course content and approaches used in delivering information literacy programmes and activities. The selected libraries comprise the libraries at the University of Malaya (UM), National University of Malaysia (UKM), University Putra Malaysia (UPM), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

Keywords: Information literacy, information seeking, Malaysia, information competencies.

Introduction

Malaysia with a population of 23 million has currently 16 public universities and over 600 private institutions of higher learning. The public universities are almost fully funded by the government. These universities function within the framework of the national education policies and practices. Malaysia aims to be a fully developed nation by the year 2020 . Vision 2020 which was conceptualized in 1990 emphasizes the need for Malaysia to be developed in all dimension. (Mahathir Mohamad, 1997). Among other things it calls for the unity of the nation , rooted in strong moral and spiritual values. The thrust is to develop Malaysia as an information-rich society, imbued with science and technology culture.

In order to achieve the status Malaysia must build its workforce that is knowledgeable, efficient, qualified and even multi skilled. In 1996 Malaysia embarked on the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). The MSC represents a paradigm for the information age. The aspiration is for the MSC to evolve into a global centre for the applications and testing of cutting age Information Technology advances and discoveries.

Higher Education and Information Technology

With the advancement of technologies and the process of globalization and liberalization most universities around the world are experiencing change with respect to its management and academic programmes. In many ways Malaysian universities are affected by this trend. In view of the Information Age that places importance on knowledge intensive activities, Malaysian universities has been advised to produce graduates who are knowledgeable, and well rounded and balanced with greater emphasis on information technology knowledge.

The Malaysian government, has indicated several areas in which the academia can make contributions:
a. Leverage on information, communication and telecommunication (ICT) technology for education – there is a need to encourage more widespread applications and adoptions of ICT technology in our learning environment;
b. Creating more local content – Content is a key component of the ICT services offered. Without adequate and appropriate content, the aspiration of nurturing knowledge –based economy and informed society will not be attainable.
c. Inculcation of ICT culture – Universities and other learning institutions have an important role to play   in helping the government to inculcate an ICT culture among the people especially in the academic world and Malaysian public. (Halim Shafie, 2002)

Democratization of Higher Education and Life Long Learning

While recognizing the increased importance of knowledge, and information technology, Malaysian government also subscribes to the "democratization" of higher education and the concept of life-long learning. The agenda has led to higher enrolment of students in tertiary education, with the private universities and colleges complementing the public universities. Malaysia aspires for the creation of a learning culture, which produces graduates with a capacity and desire for life long learning and striving for personal

development and excellence. Higher education must produce graduates who are effective problem solvers, capable of applying logic, critical and creative thinking to a range of problems and able to work both independently and collaboratively. These qualities call for a citizenry that is information literate.

Information Literacy

Information plays an important part in our individual or organizational pursuit. Information is a vital component in the development of critical thought as well as independent decision-making. Tofler (1990) coined the phrase "information overload" to describe the feeling of being overwhelmed, frustrated and even defeated by the amount of information available today. Wurman (1989) explained the process that leads to information overload, he calls it "information anxiety" . He defined it as the widening gap between what we understand and what we think we should understand. How do we navigate ourselves through this mess? How do students of higher learning navigate themselves? How can the universities help them? What can libraries and librarians do? The basic of information literacy, of efficiently and effectively accessing, evaluating and using information from a variety of sources are essential for survival in the information age.

Among the pioneer descriptions of an information literate person was put forward by Zurkowski (1974), President of the Information Industry, USA. According to Zukowski, "people trained in the application of information resources in their work can be called information literates. They have learned techniques and skills for utilizing the wide range of information tools as well as primary sources providing solutions to their problem". Over the last 20 years various definitions, concepts and description of information literacy have been put forward. The American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy asserts that Information Literacy is a necessary set of abilities for our daily life. A person who is information literate must have the ability to "recognize when information is need and have the capacity to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information" (American Library Association, 2000).

An information literate student would have mastered the abilities to locate, organize, evaluate and communicate information. He is thus empowered for effective decision making and freedom of choice. To produce information literate graduates, higher education can no longer accept a teaching environment in which a significant portion of the faculty views students as mere passive receivers of information. To train them to be information literate, the students must be allowed to:

gather the needed information from a variety of sources,
test the accuracy and validity of the information,
place the information into various contexts that will yield its pertinent meaning, remain skeptical about the information and be able to discriminates between fact and fiction.

The advert of IT has certainly made accessing and delivery of information possible within a few seconds. Many have confused Information Literacy as part of the IT literacy movement. Although it has been emphasized as the pathway to an information society, one must always acknowledge Information Literacy "as an intellectual framework for recognizing the need for, understanding, finding, evaluating and using information-activities which may be supported in part by fluency with information technology, in part by sound

investigative methods, but most importantly, through critical discernment and reasoning. Information literacy initiates, sustains and extends lifelong learning through abilities that may use technologies but are ultimately independent of them "(Council of Australian University Librarians, 2001).

Information literacy and Higher Education

Training people to seek and use information effectively has always been a core business for libraries and information professionals. Traditionally, in academic libraries, information seeking has been taught within the library context. Terms such as bibliographic instruction, library orientation and user education are used to describe the training of literature search and information retrieval.

Today academic libraries have been viewed as an important education institution; and information searching programmes have extended beyond "user education' to more comprehensive courses related to the participant's study and research needs. The innovations of the computing and telecommunication technologies on information systems and services have transformed libraries and their services. Library users must not only be trained to seek and use information, but also to evaluate its quality, provenance, reliability and validity. Users need to be able to detect biasness and other influences in the content.

The shift towards electronic information sources has to a certain extent confused the terminology of information literacy. Computer literacy is only one aspect of information literacy. It must be maintained that information literacy is a set of abilities that requires a combination of knowledge and skills and recognition that information is not confined to materials stored in a computer. As is happening all over the world, information professionals are often involved in imparting information technology skills and information handling skills. The concern here is to ensure that the importance of content related skills is acknowledged and that people do not equate information literacy to electronic mail and "surfing the net".

Information Literacy and Malaysian Public Universities

For the purpose of this paper a survey and interview were carried out at 5 public universities libraries in the state of Selangor, and the Federal Territory , Malaysia. The universities are:

a. University of Malaya (UM) in Kuala Lumpur (established in 1947)
b. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) (Malaysia National University, established in 1970)
c. University Putra Malaysia (UPM) (established in 1971)
d. International Islamic University, Malaysia (IIUM) (established in 1983)
e. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) (established in 1956)

Figure 1 : Information Literacy Programme at UKM

Programme & duration	Target Audience	Methodology	Status	Objectives
1) Module 1 – Library skills – Library Orientation – Library Tour – OPAC – -Online resource (1hr – 2 ½ hr)	New Students (Undergraduates & postgraduates) staff, visitors	Tour and hands-on	Compulsory for students	a)Overview of the library collection and services b)Understand and able to perform information search c)Developing life long learners
2) Module 2 – Information skill workshop – General – OPAC – CD-ROM, Databases, – Internet, Online resources (1 hr each)	New Students (Undergraduates & postgraduates) staff	Hands on 5-10 in a group	Optional	
3) Module 3 – information skill workshop according to field of study. Social Science; Economic & Administration; Science & Technology; Education; Engineering; Islamic studies; Law; Medicines. (2 hrs each)	Students & staff	Hands on 5-10 in a group	Offered to faculty	
4) Modul 4 – information skills workshop – on demand library research for undergraduates, post graduates & staff. (2 hrs.)	Students & staff	Hands-on 10-30 in a group	Offered to faculty	Able to perform information search
5) Integrated programme with the faculty – a research courses carried out at the faculty allocates the library, 2 periods for library research example the (Science & Technology Faculty) 6. Co-curriculum programme – offered 2 courses to be take by undergraduate students as co-curriculum with 1 credit hours each. a) Managing resources centers (1 semester, 1 hour per week) b) Bibliographic databases and information skills. (1 semester, 1 hr per week) Note: Faculty of Technology & Information Science offers ' Information skills" course for their students)	Undergraduates and postgraduates.	Lectures & hands-on Lectures, hands-on, assignments, tests	Compulsory For research courses Optional for undergraduates	a) Understand the functions of libraries and resource centres b) Able to search the databases available in the UKM library. c) Develop their information skills d) Facilitate database management of the UKM library.

Figure 2 : Information Literacy Programme at UM

Programme & duration	Target Audience	Methodology	Status	Objectives
1. Since 1998/99 Academic year, the Library offered Information Skills Course (GXES 1401) as 1 credit hr course. It is compulsory for all undergraduates (1 hr. per week). – Library orientation – OPAC – Online resources	All new undergraduates Postgraduates & staff	Lectures, hands–on, assignments, test and final exam (with workbooks) (100 to a class with 2 facilitators) Lectures; hands-on	Compulsory for all undergraduates	a) Equip students with information retrieval skills to meet their learning and research needs b) Encourage resource based independent learning c)Contributes to the University effort in producing graduates who are IT and Information literate d) Develop independent life long learners

Figure 3: Information Literacy Programme at UiTM

Programme & duration	Target Audience	Methodology	Status	Objectives
1. Library orientation - Tour - OPAC - Online Resources (1 – 2hrs)	New students & staff	Lecture, tour	Compulsory for all new students	To familiarise them with the library collection and services
2. Saturday classes – Students & staff can request from the library aspects they need training on , examples, on online resources; CD ROM; citations, etc Note : 4 Faculties offer Information Skills course to their first year students : a. Faculty of Information Studies b. Faculty of Administration and Law c. Faculty of Communication and Media Studies d. Faculty of Office Management &Technology	Students & staff	Lecture; hands-on	Optional	Able to carry out information search

Figure 4: The Information literacy programme at IIUM

Programme & duration	Target Audience	Methodology	Status	Objectives
1. Library skills – Basic 2. Tour; Opac; Internet (1 hr)	Undergraduates	Tour, Demonstration (Not more then 30 to a group)	Compulsory For all undergraduate.	Overview of the library collection and services
3. Library skill – Advance - Online resources; Internet search; - CD- ROM; (2 hrs.)	Undergraduate & post graduate.	Lecture; Hands-on (Not more then 30 to a group)	Optional	Understand and able to perform information search
4. English For Academic Purposes (Language Centre) – given by the library 2 hrs. during their class time for Library Skills – Advance Course	English classes	Lectures ; Hands-on (Not more then 30 to a group)	Compulsory for all Students taking English	

Figure 5 : The Information Literacy Programme at UPM

Programme & duration	Target Audience	Methodology	Status	Objectives
1. Orientation - OPAC - Online resources	New Students (Diploma, Undergraduate, Post graduates, Distance learning & staff)	Lecture, multimedia presentations	Compulsory for new students	Familiarize with library. Collection and Services
2. Information Literacy Programme – On Going - Information search strategy - OPAC - CD-ROMS/Current Contents on CD - Online Journals - UPM Databases - Internet (2 hrs. each session)	Students & Staff	Lecture, Hands-on Students need to book – a group of 10 and above	Optional	a)Train users to be effective information seekers; b) Able to find & evaluate information efficiently and effectively from various sources
3. EDU 3014 – Information Literacy (2 credit hrs. course)	Diploma & Undergraduate	Lecture, hands-on, assignments, tests, final examination (2 hrs. a week)	Optional as a credit hour	Understand the value of and need for information; identify the various sources of information; acquire skills in retrieving and accessing information for life long education

As indicated in Figure 1 UKM provides 4 different modules for its information skill programme. Most of the programmes are optional., they also report receiving a good flow of requests especially from faculty members urging their students to sign up for modules 2, 3 and 4. The faculty of Science and Technology allocate two periods within their research course for students to learn how to search for information through the library. This emplaces the library as an important resource in the promotion of information literacy. Their Co-Curriculum classes were also able to attract up to 200 students every semester. Most of the information skills programmes were organized based on Eisenberg/Berkowitz Information Problem –Solving (Big 6) model (Spitzer, Eisenberg and Lowe, 1998).

Prior to starting the GXES 1401: Information Skills Course in 1998/1999 session, the University of Malaya Library (Figure 2) in 1996/1997 session conducted a survey of Library Skills and Computer Literacy among students enrolling at the University of Malaya. (Cha11, & Tan-Lim , 1997). Based on the findings the library gained an insight of the library usage pattern, levels of information skills and IT skills of undergraduates. Due to the large enrolment of about 4000 undergraduates per year, the Information Skills course was divided into 2 semesters. The Arts and Social Sciences faculties were provided the Information Skills course during their first semester, while the Pure and Applied Sciences faculties were scheduled the course in their second semester. This was due to the constraints of inadequate facilities and facilitators.

The Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).(Figure 3) has 2 intakes of students yearly. The library offers library orientation programmes for each intake and encourages students and staff to utilize the services of the information services department by making appointments for tutorials and hands on instruction, which are schduled every Saturday. It is also encouraging to note that 4 faculties in UiTM offer Information Skills as a compulsory course for their first semester students.

The International Islamic University (IIUM) (Figure 4) divides its library skills programme into basic and advance courses. Although the advance course is not compulsory for all undergraduates, the Language Centre has allocated 2 hours for the library to teach advance library skills. Thus, all undergraduates at IIUM have the opportunity to undergo the advance library skills course.

The University Putra Malaysia (UPM) (Figure 5) offers on-going Information Literacy programmes . The students, on their own initiative or being asked by their lecturers, sign up for these programmes. UPM also offers a 2 credit hour Information Literacy Course (EDU 3014) as an elective course. About 40 - 60 students attend the course every semester. The code is (EDU) is registered under the Faculty of Education. The reason for it is that the Library does not have a faculty status. The course is open to any Diploma or undergraduate students. The postgraduate students only audit the course. The programmes are designed based on Eisenberg/Berkowitz Information Problem Solving and the Irving- Marland - Information Skills model (Spitzer, Eisenberg and Lowe, 1998).

Observations

Of the 5 universities above, only UPM uses the term information literacy to describe their programmes. The other 4 , UKM, UM, UiTM and IIUM uses the term information skills

or library skills. The librarians interviewed in their universities agree on the concept of information literacy, but felt that their programmes does not qualify to be called information literacy. Those interviewed consider that they What they considered they have been training the students to be able to:

a. Locate information within the library;
b. Use a variety of information systems (OPAC, Online Journals, Internet, CD-ROM) to search and retrieve information from various formats);
c. Differentiation between primary and secondary sources;
d. Assessing search results for quality, reliability, authority, validity and timeliness.

It is obvious that UM offers the information skills module as a compulsory course for all its undergraduates. During these four years of implementation there were various issues that they have to continuously address.

a. The programme is conducted in isolation and the feeling is that it is not very effective. Therefore it should be integrated into each faculty's curriculum. From another study carried out by the library was found that majority of the first year students (52%) felt that the topic on OPAC were very useful for them, while other topics such as search strategy, reference sources, CD-ROM and citation were only "useful" and moderately useful for most of them (Chan & Zaharah, 2001). The students seemed to depend too much on prescribed texts, and the library felt that the faculty should encourage more resource-based learning.

b. Each librarian at the UM Library has 3 hours of class with the students and this does not include time for preparation, marking of assignments, tests and examination papers and other workload.

c. Physical facilities like computers and projectors are limited.

d. It was found that one hour a week is not enough for lectures and hands-on application. Extending the contact hour would be inappropriate because the Information Skills course is only one credit programme.

e. Those interviewed also felt that the librarians need to be trained to be quality instructors and facilitators.

f. Resources (equipments, finance, staffing) needed must be made available to implement information literacy programmes.

Most of the libraries approached are considering to offer a compulsory one-semester course in their universities. Constraints such as staff time, computers, projectors and finance have prevented the other university libraries to realize the programme. However, most libraries agree that it will not only develop the students but will also enhance the image of libraries. More research must be carried out to first evaluate the present programmes and to understand the needs of the library users.

Many felt that greater commitment must be secured from the university administration. Some academic librarians felt that teaching should not be part of their duties and that if they are being asked to do so, certain remunerations should be entitled to them. All the librarians

interviewed were unanimous about the benefits of the programmes. They felt that their efforts in teaching have benefited from these perspectives:

a. They believe that the programme have empowered their users for life in terms of information seeking skill, which is very important in today's educational, business or even social environment
b. Users with actual reference questions and not just directional are utilizing the information service, especially the information desk.

Conclusion

Anderson (2001) commented that " many information literacy programs come about as a result of seeking new directions and have ended by acting as signposts along the way to others who are designing or redesigning their programs".This is true for the public universities in Malaysia. Most libraries want to run information literacy programmes for their users, but are held back by constraints and they are looking at other methods of delivery. Currently, some of the universities are designing online tutorials for their information literacy programmes and hope to implement them in the near future. Information literacy need to be fostered and supported throughout the student's university career, enabling them to locate, evaluate and use the information.

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