Information Communication Channels for Incoming International Students at Public Universities in Malaysia

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Abstract

Universities in Malaysia are reaching out to international students. These students need access to information for their academic needs. Due to unfamiliarity with the new information environment, incoming international students often face barriers associated with information acquisition that may hinder their academic success. To better serve these students, academic libraries need a better understanding of the nature of barriers that the students face in meeting their information needs. The purpose of this study was to examine the main information channels of incoming international students at three major public universities in Malaysia and to identify the main barriers in meeting their information needs. A questionnaire-based survey method was used for data collection. The sample comprised 115 randomly selected incoming international students from University Malaya, University Putra Malaysia and University Kebangsaan Malaysia. The results indicate that the Internet (95.6%) and university library (76.5%) were the main channels for getting the needed information. Majority of the respondents (72.2%) faced barriers when attempting to meet their information needs, which included unfamiliarity with the organization of academic library, inadequate proficiency of English and Malay language, inadequate knowledge about library system, hesitant to approach reference and professional librarians. Despite facing barriers, a considerable percentage of the respondents (47.2%) had not received any instruction from the library. The findings of this study can be used to assist instructors of information skills or information literacy in planning effective instructional programme that will lead to lowering anxiety levels among international students and enable them to overcome the barriers in meeting their information needs.

Keywords: Information needs; Information channels; Information seeking barriers; International students; Malaysia

1. Introduction

Malaysian's goal of becoming a developing country by the year of 2020 ("Vision 2020") has brought a wide spectrum of changes to the nation. Among them is the Government's aim to make Malaysia a center of excellence for higher education in the region. Internationalization of higher education is one of the most important initiatives which have been put forward to realize this aim and refers to the policies of the academic institutions to deal with global trends (Pang, 2005). A great asset of internationalization of higher education is utilization of international students (Altbach, 2002). Beside economic development, the positive contribution of international students to the success and enrichment of colleges and universities are numerous. Their presence tends to enrich campus diversity by exposing other graduate and undergraduate students to different cultural and ethnic experiences. Their presence also brings an international perspective and promotes a degree of global awareness on campus (Wang and Frank, 2002).

Currently Malaysian institutions of higher education are striving to attract foreign students from other countries. Among these institutions, University of Malaya (UM), the oldest university in the country, has a goal to increase the percentage of international students to 30% of the postgraduate population by 2006. (Institute of Postgraduate Studies, 2006).

According to Nik Mustapha (2006), University Putra Malaysia has set its mission to sustain and increase its international students' intake and aims to reach the target of 3,000 foreign students by 2010. National University of Malaysia (*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia)*, another public university, has set one of its goals in the era of globalization as "the national university with an international reach" (Abdul Samad *et al.*, 2002). To meet their goals, the universities attempt to provide appropriate academic, recreational, cultural, counseling and informational support for this group of students.

While efforts are made to make these internationals students welcome and adapt to the new environment it cannot be denied that these students face problems. Earlier studies have indicated that the problems include adapting to the new educational and social environment, pressures of staying away from home, financial pressures, language problem, and lack of friends (Australasian Law Teachers' Association, 1995). Other studies that have examined the problems of international students, grouped them into 11 categories: financial aid, placement, services, English language, academic records, health services, socio-personal, admission and selection, living/dinning services, orientation services, students activities, and religious services (Michigan International Student Problem Inventory, cited in Galloway and Jenkins, 2005).

The problems can be seen also where sharing information, discovering knowledge and meeting information needs for educational success is the ultimate goal for this culturally heterogeneous group of student (Baron and Strout-Dapaz, 2001). International student come from a wide diversity of cultures and have different experiences with the libraries in their home countries. Many of them are unfamiliar with the open stacks in libraries, the classification systems and reference material (Liu, 1993) and some of them have no prior experience with the electronic resources in their home counties (Song, 2004). However, incoming international students may even experience higher levels of library anxiety, which is compounded by their newness to the university and the country than continuing international students. Jackson, (2004) points out, while continuing students my have obtained an awareness of campus policies and are adept in using the library information sources and services, the exposure of incoming international students to their new academic library is limited.

This study explores the main information channels that incoming international student use for getting the required information as well as main barriers in meeting their information needs at three major public universities in Malaysia; University Malaya (UM), University Putra Malaysia (UPM) and University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). As there is very limited research which focuses on international students in Malaysia, the findings of this study will be useful to assist instructors of information skills or information literacy and librarians in planning effective instructional programme that will lead to lower anxiety levels and meeting their information needs.

2. Related Studies

Information seeking can be done through both formal and informal channels of communications. The formal channels mainly comprise libraries whereas informal channels include personal interactions through telephone calls, letters, e-mail, conversations at meetings and conferences (Hart, 1993). There are various factors that may interfere in the process of using information channels and create barriers in meeting the information needs. Theses factors could be personal, organizational and situational (Ikoja-Odongo and Ocholla, 2003). Currently, due to an increase of enrolment of international students in higher education, many researchers have focused their research on the barriers or challenges that international students faced in usage of academic

libraries for meeting their information needs (Liu, 1993; Onwuegbuzie and Jiao, 1997; Kumar and Suresh, 2000; Liestman, 2000; Baron and Strout-Dapa, 2001).

Liu (1993) explored the difficulties of students from developing countries, mostly Asian, in using the American libraries. In interviews with fifty-four foreign students at the University of California, Liu revealed that international students had problems when they were using American academic libraries to meet their information needs. He found out that although foreign students were required to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) before being enrolled in universities, their main difficulty was the lack English proficiency, followed by unfamiliarity with the American library systems, and confusion when too many results were retrieved from online information sources.

Liu and Redfern (1997) conducted a survey of multicultural students at the San Jose State University to examine the level of success and the level of difficulty of library use in meeting the needed information. In this survey, Asian students comprised the majority of the sample. The authors found that students' difficulties in using the library was related to English proficiency, frequency of library use, and frequency of reference desk inquiry. The results showed that students with English as their primary language were usually more successful in using the library than those with English as a second language. Other results indicated that a fear of asking stupid questions, a belief that their English was not good enough, the inability to understand the answers well, the lack of familiarity with reference desk, and low frequency of library use hindered Asian students in locating needed information in the library.

Brown (2000) centered his research on the types of barriers that faced international students and reference librarians. He listed the barriers as linguistic, technological and cultural obstacles. Brown pointed out that linguistic issues include both obvious (such as accent, lexicon and syntax) and not-so-obvious issues (sociolinguistics, or the social settings and interactions of language).

Kumar and Suresh (2000) in their study on strategies for providing effective reference services for international adult learners noted that barriers in effective utilization of library sources and services by international students are due to communication problem that may occur between reference librarian and these students.

Similarly, Baron and Strout-Dapaz (2001) focused their research on the difficulties that international students faced in sharing information and discovering knowledge. For this purpose, they mailed surveys to the head of reference services and to the directors of the international student offices of 300 academic member libraries of TexShare. Through the survey and follow up research, Baron and Strout-Dapaz supported their hypotheses that the same challenges in educational institutions were present in libraries and posed obstacles in the process of meeting the information needs. The major problems were language and communication problems, cultural adjustment problems and conforming to educational and library systems. The researchers suggested that libraries must conduct information literacy courses with emphasis on international students' special needs. As international students become more information literate, the problematic issues will be reduced.

Another user survey was carried out by Ariyapala and Edzan (2002) among international students at University of Malaya (UM). The study used questionnaires to explore the student's ability of using the online catalogue in the UM Library. The findings indicated that some of students do find difficulties in using the online catalogue due to never having used OPAC facilities before, unclear instruction in the OPAC, no guidance given before use, and language difficulties. The authors recommended that librarians must teach the library systems and services through instructional programme and provide printed

instructions in English as well as Malay language.

Thus, the major issues libraries face are how to effectively help international students with these challenges to meet their information needs, while increasing comfort levels in the library and reducing library anxiety among them.

3. Methodology and Scope

There were 17 public higher education institutions (IPTA) at the time of the study (April 2006) in Malaysia, but this study focused on only three universities; University of Malaya (UM), University Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), as these universities are among the most reputable and well-established universities that proclaimed to increase their number of international students.

A questionnaire based survey research method was used for this study. The questionnaire consisted of 2 sections with 10 open and close-ended questions. Section "A" deal with the demographic information of the respondents such as their age, gender, area of study, discipline and country of origin. Section "B" gathers data on information channels they used, barriers in meeting their information needs and received instruction on information skill from their academic library.

This study adopted a sample of convenience, which comprised first year postgraduate international students who were taking the Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language) course in Semester 2 Session 2005-2006 in the above three public universities. In Malaysian universities, international students are required to attend and pass a basic course in Bahasa Melayu. Therefore, it was the most central and accessible place for international students from all levels of programs and majors to get together.

A total of 150 questionnaires were administered to students who were in class on the day of the distribution for this study. One hundred and fifteen (76.6%) international students responded to the questionnaires, 45(39.1%) from University Malaya; 48 (41.7%) from University Putra Malaysia; and 22 (19.1%) from University Kebangsaan Malaysia.

4. Results and Discussion

(a) Respondents

Among 115 respondents, 76 (66.1%) were male and 39(33.9%) were female. As to the country of origin, 60 (52.2%) respondents came from Middle East countries, 22 (19.1%) from African countries, 27 (23.7%) from Asian countries and 6 (5%) from other parts of world, representing 28 different countries. The largest number of respondents (80, 69.6%), were between ages 26 and 35 years. In terms of level of study, 74 (64.3%) were enrolled in Masters programme, followed by 41 (35.7%) in the doctoral program. In terms of faculty of study, 20 (17.4%) were from Science, 19 (16.5%) from Computer Science and Information Technology, 16 (13.9%) from Engineering, 10 (8.7%) for Languages and Linguistics and Agriculture respectively, 9 (7.8%) from Medicine, 6 (5.2%) from Islamic Studies, 5 (4.3%) from Economic and Administration, 4 (3.5%) each for Business, Accountancy and Social Sciences, 3(2.6%) from Law and other respondents were from Environment Studies, Veterinary and Education. This profile indicates that international students were quite evenly distributed in terms of gender, were primarily between the ages of 26 and 35, enrolled in a Masters programme, and the majority were from Middle Eastern countries, and were from science and technology based faculties.

(b) Information Channels for Study Purpose

Respondents were asked to indicate the main information channels that they used to meet their information needs related to their programme of study, courses and research. Five main channels were mentioned (Table 1).

Table 1: Information Seeking Channels Used by Respondents (N=115)

Information Channels	f	%
Internet	110	95.6
Library	88	76.5
Friends-home country	81	70.4
Lecturers/Tutors	71	61.7
Friends-local	57	49.5
Others	29	25.2

Table 1 shows that the Internet was the most used information channel. The library was rated as the second highest 88(76.5%) used information channel. Consult with home country friends 81(70.4%), lecturers or tutors 71(61.7%) and local friends 57 (49.5%) were also considered as other channels for getting the required information.

Apparently, a large majority of incoming international students met their information needs through the Internet. It seems, they have a preference for the channel that is speedy and require lest effort such as the Internet. This finding is in line with Branch's (2003) study who observed that non-traditional students use the Internet as the primary information seeking channel for their information needs such as academic assignments, health problems, and then turn to people such as friends, co-workers, family, and professionals. Metzger et al. (2003) noted that one of the basic uses of the Internet by students was to search for sources and information to complete their course assignments.

(c) Barriers to Information Needs

International students were asked to state whether they faced any barriers when attempting to meet their information needs. As seen in the Figure 1, the majority of respondents 83 (72.2%) indicated that they had faced barriers.
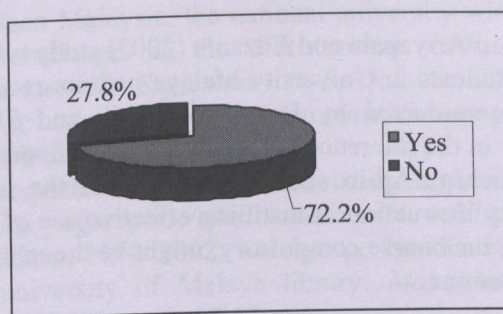

27.8%

72.2%

■Yes
■No

Figure 1: Barriers Faced in Meeting Information Needs

Those respondents, who had faced barriers in meeting their information needs, were further asked to mention the nature of the barriers. Respondents indicated that unfamiliarity with the organization of their academic library (54, 65.1%), low proficiency in both English and Malay language (42, 50.6%), inadequate knowledge about library system (33, 39.7%) were the main obstacles in meeting their information needs (Table 2).

Table 2: Barriers Faced by Respondents (N=83)

Main Barriers to Information Needs	f	%
Unfamiliarity with the organization of the library	54	65.1
English and Malay languages	42	50.6
Inadequate knowledge about library system	33	39.7
Hesitant to approach reference desk and professional librarians	29	34.9
Inability to seek, to obtain and to evaluate information	17	20.4
Inadequate knowledge about using the computer	8	9.6

Baron and Strout-Dapaz (2001) found that adjusting to new educational /library system, language/communication problems, and general cultural adjustments are three major challenges for international students. This suggests that international students need a solid library skills set to become more information literate and overcome the problematic issues.

(d) Instruction on Information Skills

Those who had faced barriers were also asked to indicate whether they had received any formal instruction on information skills from their academic library in Malaysia.

Table 3 indicates that despite facing barriers, a considerable number (40, 48.2%) of the respondents claimed that they have never received any instruction from their library. This is surprising as many of them indicated that unfamiliarity with organization of the library, their inadequate knowledge about library system or inability to seek, to obtain and to evaluate information are the barriers to meeting their information needs.

Table 3: Received Instruction on Information Skills (n=83)

Received Instruction on Information Skills	f	%
Yes	43	51.8
No	40	48.2

This finding is similar to Ariyapala and Edzan's (2002) study who found that the many of foreign postgraduate students in University Malaya had not received instruction from the library. Other studies conducted by Baruchson-Arbib and Shor (2002) and Callinan (2005) (insert bib infor in the reference list) revealed a low uptake of library instruction by college students. Baruchson-Arbib and Shor suggested the unawareness of librarians about the role of library instruction in instilling effective use of information resources by students or not making the course compulsory, might be the main reasons for students not receiving library instructions.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that incoming international students used various information channels to meet their information needs. Among the channels, the Internet was preferred when searching for information. The majority of students showed a reliance on the Internet for getting the required information mostly related to their study. This raises important concerns about the nature of information obtained by students and their ability to evaluate the Internet information effectively. This suggests that all of them need to be provided with skills to help them be efficient and effective searchers, and enable them to critically evaluate Internet information resources. This is especially true when

Sullivan (2001) revealed, "half of those turning to search engines said they failed to find the answers they wanted".

The results showed that majority of the respondents faced barriers when attempting to meet their information needs. The main barriers were due to unfamiliarity with the organization of the library or inadequate knowledge about library system. As these students come from different country and have different library experience that affect on their attitude toward the library and their utilization of the information sources and services, a library tour for new international students is necessary to show them the physical layout of the library.

Language was another barrier in meeting the information needs of the respondents. Language barrier may be the result from inability of library staff specially reference librarians to understand the students need due to the students' lack of good level of the English language proficiency or variation in pronunciation, intonation, and speech patterns. At the same time, it may also result from students' inability to clearly express their information needs. Therefore, at least one reference librarian should be assigned to this group of students to help build their confidence with the language and by being patient and positive.

Despite facing barriers, a considerable number of incoming international students had not participated in instructional programme on information skills provided by the library. A marketing strategy is needed to encourage international students to participate in this program.

The findings will be useful in providing better library and information services to this group of students. The results will also assist instructors of information skills or information literacy courses and librarians in planning effective instructional programme that will lead to lower anxiety levels among international students and enable them to overcome the barriers in meeting their information needs.

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