

The Use of Subscribed Online Databases among the Postgraduates at the University of Malaya Library

Janaki S and Pauziaah Mohamed

University of Malaya Library,
University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur
E-mail: janaki@um.edu.my; pauzia@um.edu.my

Abstract

This paper describes the steps taken by the University of Malaya Library to successfully implement the continual improvement project for the year 2005, entitled "Promoting the Use of Online Databases". It includes the efforts by the library to increase the usage of online databases among the postgraduates by 20% as compared to the year 2004. It is realized that increasing the basic awareness of these online databases among the library users and highlighting the relevant databases for the respective faculty prove to be vital to bring about an increase in the usage. This paper will be helpful to libraries trying to increase the usage of online databases subscription so as to make the subscription cost effective

Keywords: Online databases; Online reference services; Library usage; Continual improvement project; Information skills; Academic libraries

1. Introduction

Academic libraries throughout the world today provide various online services to their users. One of the popular services is to provide access to online databases consisting of electronic resources such as e-journals and e-books. There has been an exponential growth in electronic resources, and academic libraries have been spending a substantial amount of the budget yearly to subscribe online databases. Tenopir (2001) used data from Information Market Indicators (IMI) to trace the growth of database industry in the year 2001 to 12,000 databases, 4,000 database producers and 15 billion records in these databases. It is imperative that libraries conscientiously keep usage statistics of the subscribed databases to ensure that these databases are widely used thus making them cost effective to continue subscription.

Collecting usage data for databases have been carried out by academic libraries in different ways. Some libraries have been relying heavily on vendors or publishers usage reports. So far, libraries have not been following a standard guideline to measure the usage of databases. The International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC, 2006) has formulated a set of guidelines to measure the usage of online databases. The guideline stipulates that the following elements can be used to measure the usage of databases:

- a) Specific database
- b) IP address
- c) Account or ID number of individual user
- d) Specific time period such as certain days and hours.

2. The Case Study: The University of Malaya Library

The University of Malaya Library at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is the oldest university in the country. It is a century old and dates back to its origin to the year 1905 when it was first setup in Singapore. To invigorate the teaching, learning and research process, the university made a decision to move towards a standard quality management system. The University of Malaya achieved the MS ISO 9001:2000 certification in 2002 for the whole

university, the first university to do so in the country. The Quality Management System (QMS) was adopted by all the 27 responsible centres throughout the campus. Each responsible centre is committed to make the QMS at the University a success by (a) setting up relevant quality objectives with the purpose of achieving customer satisfaction; and (b) delivering products or services in the most efficient way.

The Library is one of the centres which support teaching, learning and research activities of the University through its core activities of collection development, reference services and user education. To sustain QMS, the library like the other responsible centres, has an ISO Committee which consists of the chief librarian, a quality manager, a document controller, internal auditors and representatives from each of the branch and special library in the university's library network. This ISO Committee meets once a month and it continually checks on the quality objectives of the library, one of which is: *"to ensure 95 per cent of first year undergraduate students and 20 per cent of postgraduate students are given training and guidance in the field of information skills every year"*.

The 95 per cent for undergraduates is easily achieved because the Information Skills Course is a compulsory course for all undergraduates at the University of Malaya. To provide training and guidance for 20 per cent of postgraduates, the library conducts Information Skills Sessions three times a week at the computer laboratory in the main library. Each session is for 2-3 hours and consists of two modules. In the first module (Module 1), students are taught the strategic methods of searching the online catalogue of the library using search options such as author, title, subject, periodicals, theses or dissertations and keyword. They are also taught how to limit the search by language, type of material and specific library within the network. In the second module (Module 2), students are introduced to the library's Interactive Web Portal, which provides access to the various online databases subscribed by the library. Campus net and remote access features are explained to the students. They are taught the basic, advanced and publication search using specific databases as well as how to acquire the needed article via email, download and print. Personalized features such as creating alert services and saving favourite journal titles are also demonstrated to the students.

(a) Usage of Online Databases

Following the guidelines formulated by ICOLC, the library has been collecting usage of its online databases using the following elements:

- a) specific database login
- b) login by user ID
- c) monthly usage

Login or Logon (Young, 2001), is the process of identifying a user to a computer after connecting over communication lines. During the procedure, the computer usually requires the user's name and password. At the University of Malaya Library, the user has to login via the Library's Interactive Web Portal using the library ID to access the online databases subscribed by the library. Monthly usage statistics are reviewed to identify the most used database. For the past 5 years, the top five most used databases at the University of Malaya library are Ovid Medical, Science Direct, Proquest ABI/Inform, EBSCO Business Source and Infotrac. The total number of logins for all the databases subscribed since 2003 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Total login for the years 2003-2006 at the University of Malaya Library

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006
Login	266,188	321,906	357,624	424,658

Although the total number of logins increased over the years, it does not reflect who the users are; whether they are undergraduates, postgraduates or academic staff. The total number of logins could have come from the same users who frequent the electronic resources. The library felt that usage statistics should reveal the category of users using the databases regardless of how many times or how long they use the databases. This is one way of knowing if the databases are used widely by all the library members in campus.

The library wants more postgraduate students to use the databases. The library's ultimate goal is to ensure that every postgraduate makes use of the online databases for learning and research. There are three reasons for this goal. First, findings from the customer satisfaction survey carried out in 2003 showed that a majority of postgraduates use print resources more than electronic resources. Second, suggestions from users and online enquires at the library, revealed that there are many postgraduates who are unsure of accessing and obtaining articles from these databases. Third, statistics kept at the Reference Desk showed a remarkable number of users especially postgraduates enquiring about online databases.

Furthermore, postgraduates who do not attend the Information Skills Session conducted by the library may not acquire the skills to access and search e-journals and e-books. Publicizing and promotion these sessions are merely done by putting up posters in the library and at the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS). Many of the postgraduates are part time students who are engaged in some kind of employment outside. Students who do not come to the library may not be aware of these sessions conducted especially for them. This problem also exists elsewhere as reported by Wu (2007) that at least 29.3 per cent of students think that propaganda of electronic resources in university libraries is insufficient. The percentage of postgraduates who attended the information skills sessions at the University of Malaya library was 21.1 percent in 2003 and 26.5 percent in 2004. This means that those who did not join the training sessions in those two years account for about 75 percent. It was not known if the students who do not attend the sessions have the know how to access the electronic resources of the library.

The library has decided that more postgraduates should be given information skills training and guidance than the present quality objective of targeting only 20% of postgraduate students. The ISO library committee unanimously decided to target this area as a continual improvement project for the year 2005. The project was named "Promoting the usage of online databases" especially among the postgraduates. The objective of the project was to increase the number of postgraduates accessing online databases by 20% in 2005 as compared to the previous year, 2004. A Project Committee was set up consisting of nine librarians. The chairperson selected to spearhead the committee was the Head of Research and Academic Services Division. This division handles user education sessions for undergraduates, postgraduates and academic staff at the University of Malaya Library.

(b) Analysis of Problem

Using the Fishbone analysis chart (Figure 1), four elements considered as the input variables which affect the number of user login to the online databases were analyzed. These input variables, namely machine, manpower, software and methodology were studied.

- i) Machine : There is a computer lab in the library especially for the postgraduates. There are 40 PCs with Internet access. Students can use this lab free of charge and it is opened for as long the library is opened. This lab is mainly used to access the online databases especially the ones which are only accessible in campus. The availability of PCs for the postgraduates was considered as satisfactory.

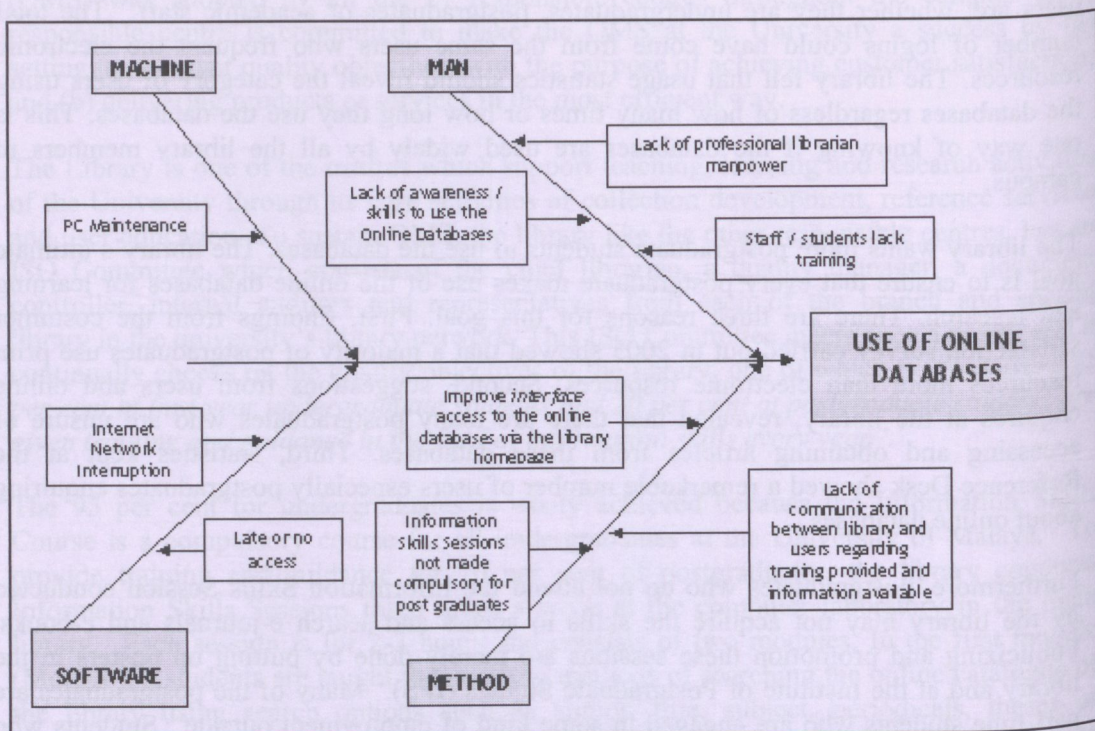


Figure 1: Analysis of Variables Affecting the Use of Online Databases using Fishbone Chart

ii) Manpower: Both the students and staff needs were analyzed. It was realized that new librarians require more training and exposure to access the online databases subscribed. The committee decided to have more training sessions on online databases in the library and it was made compulsory for all librarians especially the new ones to attend. As knowledge on these online databases is important to answer queries, all librarians take turns to handle the Reference Desk. Students, on the other hand may not even be aware of the information skills sessions conducted for them in the library. The part time students only visit the library during weekends when mostly only the new librarians are on duty. Some faculties, such as Law, Medicine and Dental have good collaboration with the branch libraries. A special Information Skills Session is arranged by the faculty and the librarian is invited to conduct the session. There was lack of collaboration between other faculties and the library.

iii. Software: The library has taken efforts to look into the needs of the students accessing the databases. The PCs are upgraded at intervals, anti virus software are installed and updated frequently. In addition, the floor near the computer lab has been configured as a hotspot area where the students can bring in their laptops and access the online databases. As and when interruption to the network occurs, it is as a result of the whole campus being affected, which is beyond the library's control. On the whole, provision of reliable software was considered very satisfactory.

iv. Methodology: There was lack of communication between library and students regarding training and sessions. The client services division in the library merely registers them as library users and do not encourage them to attend the Information Skills Sessions. The Information Skills sessions are not made compulsory for the students. It is merely an option for the students to attend only when they realize they have a problem getting

information resources. Users have to login via the Interactive Web Portal to access the databases. Many students do not know the function of the Interactive Web Portal.

The decision derived after analyzing the above four elements was that, the library will concentrate on the methodology used to reach out to students. Providing training and guidance for more students may have a proportionate increase in the number of postgraduates using the online databases. After much discussion, the committee planned to carry out the following activities and a Gantt chart (Figure 2) was prepared for timeliness.

ACTIVITIES	JAN 2005	FEB 2005	MAR 2005	APR 2005	MAY 2005	JUN 2005	JUL 2005	AUG 2005	SEP 2005	OCT 2005	NOV 2005	DEC 2005
Setup of Committee												
Plan methodology to promote the use of Online Databases to postgraduates and academic staff												
Develop activities as planned and at the same time gather usage statistics												
Implement the methods planned to promote the use of Online Databases												
Check the effects of methodology used												

Figure 2: A Gantt Chart Showing the Time Frame of the Project

3. Activities Planned to Reach Out to More Postgraduates

The following activities were planned and conducted as an outreach programme to increase the usage of online databases by postgraduate students:

- (i) Preparing brochures on the Information Skills Sessions: The Client Services Division of the library has to provide every new postgraduate student who register for library membership with brochure on the information skills sessions.
- (ii) Liaising with the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS) to publicize the service: The library requested IPS to (a) attach these brochures with the course offer letter; and (b) slot in 10-15 minutes of library briefing when students come in for briefing on course registration. In this way, it can be

ascertained that all students who are offered a place at the university will know of this library service.

- (iii) Promoting the service campus wide by sending brochures to all Faculties and Institutes informing them of this service and requesting them to put up the brochures at the faculty notice boards.
- (iv) Putting up brochures at every floor of the main library, the branch and special libraries.
- (v) Preparing and distributing Pamphlets, Subject Guides and Posters regarding the online databases training sessions provided by the library to faculties and institutes.
- (vi) Updating library's MARC records and linking the OPAC to the subscribed databases and online journals.

The Library Management also has suggested to the faculties to make the Information Skills Session compulsory for all post graduate students.

4. Outcome of the Planned Activities

- i) Briefing for new students: The Centre for Postgraduate Studies agreed to slot in a library briefing of about 10-15 minutes together with the faculties during the student registration period. Senior librarians and liaison librarians were called in to help. A total of 22 briefing sessions were held at the various faculties during the year 2005 and 2006. Power point slides describing the library collection, facilities and services were shown. The highlight of the briefing was to encourage students to attend the Information Skills Sessions.
- ii) Daily Information Skills Sessions: In anticipation of many students wanting to attend the Information Skills Sessions after the briefing, the library decided to have classes every day for the first month after the student intake instead of the usual 3 days a week schedule. The effect was even felt more in the following year when a total of 238 students attended the sessions in the month of July alone when the new session begins. Overall, a total of 937 postgraduates attended the sessions in 2005 and 1,467 postgraduates in 2006. The percentage of postgraduates who attended the Information Skills Sessions also increased from 2003 until 2006 as shown in Table 2.

There was an increase in the percentage of postgraduates who attended the Information Skills Sessions after the implementation of the project. The number of logins to the online databases have to be studied to see if the increase in the number of postgraduates who were given training and guidance has an effect on the usage of online databases. Table 3 shows the number of logins from postgraduate students for the years 2004 prior to the implementation of the Continual Improvement Project and for the year 2005 after the implementation of the project. The figures show that the project was a success because the percentage increase of postgraduates who used the online databases for the years 2004 and 2005 was 34.2% which was more than 20% as was the original objective of the Continual Improvement Project. Reaching out to more postgraduates in the form of training and guidance has definitely resulted in the increase in their usage of the online databases subscribed.

Table 2. Percentage of Postgraduates Who Were Given Guidance and Training on Information Skills

2003	2004	2005	2006
21.1%	26.5%	59.0%	72.1%

Table 3. Access of Online Databases by User Category for the Years 2004 and 2005

Year	Number of login by postgraduates	Number of postgraduates registered with the library	% of users
2004	3,220	8,176	39.4%
2005	6,018	11,386	52.9%

5. Conclusion

Overall, the library has succeeded in reaching out to more and more postgraduates each year resulting in an increase in the use of online databases. The percentage of postgraduates to be given training and guidance increased from 20 per cent to 50 percent. As a result, the quality objective of the University of Malaya Library was reviewed as “to ensure 95 per cent of first year undergraduate students and 50 per cent of postgraduate students are given training and guidance in the field of information skills every year”.

In future, the library intends to make this a compulsory session for all postgraduates. This would mean that the number of postgraduates given training and guidance will be 100% which would hopefully have a positive effect on the number of postgraduates using the online databases.

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