

**SPECIAL LIBRARY REQUIREMENTS OF EMPLOYED STUDENTS IN
HIGHER EDUCATION: A STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATES AND
POSTGRADUATES AT THE INSTITUTE OF HUMAN RESOURCE
ADVANCEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

Various employee education programmes have been introduced worldwide to provide higher educational opportunities for employed individuals. The Institute of Human Resource Advancement, affiliated with the University of Colombo, was established in 1975 to facilitate higher education opportunities for employed people in Sri Lanka. This study examines how students at IHRA utilise the library, compares patterns of library use between undergraduate and postgraduate students, and explores whether employed students have specific user needs. This study was conducted using a descriptive research design. Data were collected primarily through a structured questionnaire. Significant gaps were identified between students' high awareness and relatively low utilisation of library services, as well as between their high levels of satisfaction with the online catalogue and digital resources and the comparatively low use of these services. Students also recognised several structural and resource-related challenges, including insufficient availability of materials, limited space, and difficulties with time and location. Based on these findings, the study proposes strategies to improve library use among employed students, including enhancing remote access to electronic resources, introducing structured library instruction sessions, adopting more targeted and interactive communication strategies, and regularly reviewing and updating library collections. Collaboration between the library, academics, and institute administration is essential to identify the specific challenges faced by employed students and to develop learner-centred services that support the academic success of both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Keywords: library use, employed students, undergraduates, postgraduates, higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

People who are engaged in higher studies while employed are an important segment of the process of human resource development. Persons in employment seek to improve their skills and better their career prospects through engaging in higher studies at university level related to their employment. This growing tendency among employed persons has caused an increase in adult students receiving university education.

There have been various employee education programmes in the world. The government formed in 1970 in Sri Lanka took action to launch a workers' education movement and to enrol workers with university education (Perera, 1999). In 1975, the Institute of Workers' Education (IWE) attached to the University of Colombo was established. The name of IWE was changed into Institute of Human Resource Advancement (IHRA) in 2006. Its main degree programme is the

Bachelor of Labour Management (BLM), and it caters for employed people with GCE O/L or A/L qualification and aged 22 or above. The postgraduate courses at IHRA were started in 2007.

The library facilities of IHRA have been available since 1975 and were initially located at the College House premises. In 2002, the library was relocated to the premises of the Faculty of Education at the University of Colombo, and in 2018 it was moved to the IHRA building. At present, the library is situated within a limited space in the main IHRA building. In 2020, the library introduced an online catalogue and developed a digital collection to improve access to information resources. However, library statistics after 2018 indicated a continuous decline in library usage. Consequently, the researcher, serving as the librarian, initiated this study to investigate the reasons for the decrease in library use and to identify the specific library needs of undergraduate and postgraduate students at IHRA.

The main purpose of this study is to identify the special requirements of the employed students engaged in higher studies as library users. This study examines how students at IHRA utilize the library, compares patterns of library use between undergraduate and postgraduate students, and explores whether employed students have specific user needs. Based on these findings, the study also proposes strategies to improve library use among employed students.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Sullivan-Windle (1993), the students found the university library to be a good place to study, a place to find information and a place to receive service. Teoh and Tan (2011) found that frequent users were enthusiastic about using the library both online and in its physical form.

Many surveys have identified borrowing materials, studying, photocopying, using for reference services, and socializing are the main activities of university students done in libraries. Whitmire (2001) identified using the catalogue, searching for periodical full text, searching the internet, borrowing and reserving books, asking for inter-library loans, taking photocopies, referencing, using government documents, studying, using the computer lab and socialising as the general library activities of undergraduates. The most used library service of the undergraduates of Mississippi State University (Grimes & Charles, 2000) was the photocopy facility. Their other library activities were studying, using the online catalogue and internet, and using the reference services. Socialising was also a main activity that the undergraduates engaged in library premises, though it is not related to studying. Similarly, undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill used the library for a variety of academic and non-academic purposes, including borrowing books and other materials, checking email, conducting research, engaging in individual and group study, printing and photocopying, using computer laboratories, reading newspapers, resting, using restroom facilities, and spending leisure time (Wolf, 2005).

The Senior Librarians in Sri Lankan universities have noticed for some time that the library usage of undergraduates for academic purposes is diminishing (Karannagoda, 2015). The researcher similarly observed that most students who visited the E-Resource Centre of the University of Colombo, Main Library spent their time sending personal emails, engaging in video chatting, and watching films and videos which are not directly related to their academic activities. A pilot study conducted with undergraduates of the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka revealed that only photocopying and scanning demonstrated a significant positive relationship with the academic performance of the undergraduates (Karannagoda, 2019).

When the undergraduates at the University of North Carolina were asked whether the library is important to the University, 99% of them responded positively (Wolf, 2005). Undergraduates at a

public university in Malaysia also extended their positive attitude towards the library (Teoh & Tan, 2011).

Research has indicated that some users held negative attitudes toward libraries and library staff. Although both undergraduate and graduate students expected libraries to provide effective services, they have expressed frustration with the catalogue system, the technology used, and interactions with staff (Sullivan-Windle, 1993). While the students acknowledged the advantages of the online catalogue compared with the traditional card catalogue, they complained that it sometimes provided misleading information. For example, the catalogue might indicate that a particular item is available when, in reality, it is not. Students often made considerable efforts to understand the technology and gradually became familiar with it. However, some reported that staff made them feel guilty for not understanding the technology initially. In addition, the library was understaffed, making it difficult for students to receive assistance when needed. Book trolleys were frequently left full, which made it difficult for students to locate materials on the shelves. Although this situation occurred in the 1990s, similar conditions in any library environment may discourage users from making full use of library services.

In general, most studies on university students' library use have emphasised the importance of library instruction. While conducting a survey to identify the determinants of library use among university students at a public university in Malaysia, the researchers came to know that the majority had attended the course in library induction previously (Teoh & Tan, 2011). Therefore, they used the library more frequently and effectively than the students who have not followed the course. This strongly suggested that when the students became more familiar with the library sources, they became more comfortable and knowledgeable in choosing the sources and using the library more frequently.

According to Grimes and Charters (2000), Mississippi State University did not offer formal library instruction programmes. However, first-year students were required to complete a unit within their English Composition courses that included basic library skills. In addition, the library conducted seminars and classes on the use of bibliographic tools available on campus. The study found that students who had received library instruction spent less time inside the library because they were able to use library resources more efficiently. Nevertheless, the authors suggested that formal library instruction programmes would further enhance the effective utilisation of library materials.

Similarly, undergraduates at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were exposed to bibliographic instruction sessions through their English Composition classes. However, when asked whether they would like to attend brief workshops to improve their library skills, the majority responded negatively (Wolf, 2005). Furthermore, although librarians were prepared to assist students in locating information resources, students tended to seek help from lecturers before approaching librarians (Vinyard, Morales, & Helton, 2024).

Employed students have benefits such as financial stability, enhanced time management skills and communication skills (Curtis & Shani, 2002). On the other hand, excessive working hours can result in reduced academic engagement and lower academic performance (Dundes & Marx, 2006). Many studies have shown that employed students use the library less than non-working students. According to Grimes & Charters (2000), the students who were engaged in full-time jobs, as well as the students live off campus, spent less time in the library. According to Whitmire (2001), the employed students who worked off-campus were less involved in academic library activities. However, Teoh and Tan pointed out that being employed did not affect their library use significantly (2011).

Postgraduate students generally have research and library skills to a certain extent. However, some may have experienced a gap between their undergraduate studies and postgraduate education, which may influence their familiarity with current research tools and library resources.

A survey was conducted among MBA students at Arizona State University to collect information about their self-evaluation of research skills, their expected use of library services and resources, and the types of data or information they considered most important for their studies (Edens & Malecki, 2020). The findings indicated that these three factors varied depending on how long the students had been away from higher education. This result can assist librarians and academic staff in designing study programs and developing library services that better support students' needs.

In another study, librarians interviewed 15 MBA students at a private university to understand their information-seeking behaviour (Vinyard, Morales, & Helton, 2024). The findings revealed that Google was the primary research tool used by the students, while their research skills differed according to prior work experience and research expertise. The study emphasised the need for increased library instruction and greater promotion of specialised business databases.

Similarly, a survey involving 32 graduate students at National Taiwan University investigated how graduate students used Google Scholar (Wu & Chen, 2014). Participants represented the disciplines of humanities, social sciences, and science and technology. The study found that students, particularly those in science and technology fields, preferred using Google Scholar over library databases. However, they also acknowledged that library databases were essential for retrieving scholarly articles. Some students reported difficulties in using Google Scholar effectively, leading the researchers to recommend that future library instruction programmes address this issue.

Reviewing studies conducted between 1997 and 2012, Catalano (2013) found that graduate students, like other information searchers, often begin their research on the internet, seek assistance from lecturers before approaching others, and use library resources differently depending on their academic discipline.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted using a descriptive research design. The study population consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students at IHRA. A random sampling method was employed, with approximately 50% of undergraduate students and 40% of postgraduate students selected to participate. Data were collected primarily through a structured questionnaire. In addition, secondary data sources—including annual reports, meeting minutes, brochures, and the official IHRA website—were consulted to support the analysis.

4. RESULTS

The majority of undergraduates (87%) and graduates (79%) were aged between 25 and 45 years, and the female population was higher than the male population of both groups (57%).

Since the workplaces of 89% of undergraduates are located within 20km of the university, attending lectures and using library facilities on weekdays is likely to be convenient for them. Though the postgraduate lectures are conducted on weekends, the fact that 54% of postgraduate students work within 20 km of the university may be advantageous for their academic activities. However, only 20% of both groups reported having obtained short-term study leave.

Although awareness of the IHRA library was high among undergraduates (97%), less than half (45%) reported using it. A similar pattern was observed among postgraduates, with 79% indicating awareness but only 41% reporting actual use. Awareness of remote access to library materials

differed between the two groups. While 75% of undergraduates reported being aware of remote access, only 52% of postgraduates indicated the same. Most students reported reading library emails, including 93% of undergraduates and 85% of postgraduates.

Although 73% of undergraduates reported being satisfied with the online library catalogue, only 45% indicated that they used it. Similarly, 77% of postgraduates expressed satisfaction with the online catalogue, yet only 50% reported using it. The majority of undergraduates (75%) and postgraduates (59%) reported that the library's digital resources—such as past papers, project reports, theses, and e-journals—were easy to access and navigate. However, only 53% of undergraduates and 48% of postgraduates indicated that they used these resources. Most undergraduates (82%) and postgraduates (89%) perceived the guidance videos on the library web page as useful. In addition, 83% of undergraduates and 93% of postgraduates indicated that the online library catalogue and digital resources improved their overall library experience.

The main library activities of undergraduates were reading books (45%), borrowing books (35%), and studying notes (18%). Postgraduates primarily used the library for borrowing books (32%), reading books (29%), referring to other materials (19%) and studying notes (11%).

The main difficulties reported by both undergraduates and postgraduates in using the library included lack of time due to employment and family commitments, the distance between the library and lecture halls, insufficient availability of required materials, and limited space. The special requirements identified by undergraduates and postgraduates included extending library opening hours beyond 4:30 p.m. on weekdays and providing daytime access on weekends, as well as offering guidance on how to search for journal articles and books online for assignments and research.

A relatively small proportion of undergraduates (10%) and postgraduates (13%) reported spending more than 5 hours per week on reading. By comparison, higher percentages-14% of undergraduates and 19% of postgraduates-reported spending more than 5 hours per week on leisure activities such as listening to the radio, watching television, and using social media.

A majority of undergraduates (70%) disagreed with the statement “Without using a library, I can complete my degree,” whereas most postgraduates indicated agreement. A majority of undergraduates (64%) and postgraduates (60%) agreed with the statement, “Without the IHRA library, I cannot complete my assignments.” Most undergraduates and postgraduates agreed that their lecturers encourage them to read relevant materials and make use of the library.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined the library use patterns and special requirements of employed undergraduates and postgraduates at IHRA. The findings reveal some important insights into how employed students engage with library services, highlighting gaps between awareness and usage, as well as institutional and personal barriers that influence their behaviour.

One of the most significant findings is the consistent gap between high awareness and relatively low utilisation of library services. Although the majority of students were aware of the library and its resources, less than half reported actively using them. This pattern was also noticeable in the use of the online library catalogue and digital resources, where high levels of satisfaction and perceived usefulness did not align with actual usage. This suggests that awareness alone is insufficient to ensure engagement, and that other factors such as time constraints or lack of habitual use may play a more significant role in shaping user behaviour.

Time constraints emerged as a critical barrier affecting library use among employed students. The majority of participants reported balancing employment and family responsibilities, while only a small proportion had access to study leave. In addition, relatively few students reported spending extended time on reading, compared to slightly higher engagement in leisure activities. These findings indicate that limited time availability significantly restricts students' ability to engage with library resources, even when they recognise their value.

Interestingly, physical accessibility does not appear to be a major limiting factor in this context. A considerable proportion of students reported working within close proximity to the university, suggesting that geographical distance alone does not hinder library use. However, students did identify the distance between the library and lecture halls as a challenge, indicating that convenience within the campus environment may still influence usage patterns. Overall, these findings imply that accessibility must be considered not only in terms of location but also in relation to time efficiency and ease of integration into students' daily routines.

Another notable finding relates to students' engagement with library communication. Although a high proportion of students reported reading emails sent by the library, institutional records indicate low response or follow-up behaviour. Enhancing the effectiveness of communication strategies—such as making them more interactive, targeted, or action-oriented—may therefore improve user engagement.

Students also identified several structural and resource-related challenges, including insufficient availability of materials, limited space, and difficulties related to time and location. In addition, the researcher observed that a considerable portion of the library collection was generally outdated. Although students reported that their lecturers encourage them to read relevant materials and use the library, library records indicate that lecturers rarely recommend new materials for acquisition. Furthermore, while students expressed a need for extended library opening hours during evenings and weekends, library statistics suggest that usage during these periods remains relatively low. These findings imply that factors influencing library use may extend beyond accessibility alone and may also involve user motivation, study habits, and perceptions regarding the relevance of library services.

In response, they expressed a need for more flexible and supportive library services, as well as guidance in accessing online academic resources. These findings emphasise the importance of aligning library services with the specific needs of employed students, who require flexibility and skill development to effectively utilise available resources.

The study also highlights important differences between undergraduates and postgraduates. Undergraduates demonstrated higher awareness of the library and remote access to library materials, while postgraduates showed slightly different usage patterns. This difference in awareness may be associated with variations in user education opportunities provided to the two groups. According to library records, undergraduates receive a library orientation session at the beginning of their degree programme, whereas postgraduates are not provided with a formal orientation. Although the library offers both groups opportunities to participate in individual or group guidance sessions, these services appear to be underutilised. Furthermore, the academic programmes do not formally integrate library instruction sessions into the curriculum. These factors may contribute to differences in familiarity with available library resources and services. Moreover, attitudes toward the necessity of the library varied between the two groups, with a notable proportion of postgraduates indicating that they could complete their degree without using the library. At the same time, a majority in both groups acknowledged that the library is essential for completing assignments. This apparent contradiction suggests that while students recognise the

functional importance of the library for specific academic tasks, they may not fully appreciate its broader role in supporting learning and research.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that while awareness and perceived usefulness of library services are relatively high among employed students, actual usage remains limited due to a combination of time constraints, behavioural factors, and service-related challenges. Addressing these issues through flexible access, targeted user education, and improved communication strategies may enhance library engagement and better support the academic success of both undergraduates and postgraduates.

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted only at the Institute of Human Resource Advancement. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to students at other higher education institutions in Sri Lanka or elsewhere, particularly those with different student populations, library facilities, or modes of study. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall errors and response bias. Finally, the use of a questionnaire limited the depth of understanding of students' motivations, academic performance and experiences, which could be explored through qualitative methods in future studies.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to improve library services and enhance engagement among employed undergraduate and postgraduate students at IHRA.

First, the library should strengthen flexible access to resources and services in order to accommodate the time constraints experienced by employed students. Although students expressed a preference for extended opening hours during evenings and weekends, usage statistics suggest that physical access alone may not significantly increase library use. Therefore, greater emphasis should be placed on improving remote access to electronic resources, online reference services, and digital support systems that can be accessed conveniently outside normal working hours.

Second, the library should enhance user education programmes to improve students' ability and confidence in using available resources. The findings indicate differences in awareness levels between undergraduate and postgraduate students, possibly due to the absence of a formal orientation programme for postgraduates. Introducing structured library orientation sessions for postgraduate students and integrating information literacy instruction into academic programmes may improve familiarity with library services and encourage more effective use of resources.

Third, the library should adopt more targeted and interactive communication strategies. Although many students reported reading library emails, follow-up engagement remained low. Communication methods that are concise, personalised, and action-oriented may improve student responsiveness and participation in library activities and services. The use of multiple communication platforms, including learning management systems and social media, may also increase visibility and accessibility of library information.

Fourth, the library should regularly review and update its collection to ensure that resources remain current and relevant to academic programmes. The study identified concerns regarding the availability and currency of materials, while institutional practices indicate limited recommendations for new acquisitions from academic staff. Stronger collaboration between the library and lecturers in collection development may therefore improve the quality and relevance of library resources.

Finally, the institution should recognise the specific challenges faced by employed students and incorporate greater flexibility into academic and library support services. Collaboration between the library, academics and institute administration is essential to develop learner-centred services that support the academic success of both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Further research may explore the relationship between students' study habits, motivation, and library use in greater depth, as well as examine the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to improve engagement with library services.

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