The impact of new information services on teaching, learning and research at the University of Zululand Library

by Lyudmila Ocholla

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The impact of new information services on teaching, learning and research at the University of Zululand Library

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Abstract

The rapidly changing academic library environment demands new library products, facilities and services that may not be readily available in many African libraries. Libraries have to walk a tight rope between shrinking budgets, currency fluctuations, and the high cost of print and e-resources. Other challenges include the growing need for research support services, improved information literacy, information client support services, and marketing of library services using social media. At the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) library, information librarians have played a pivotal role in the development of modern information services for teaching, learning and research support. The purpose of this paper is to report on the perceived impact of the new information services initiated by information librarians and to establish how such services have made a difference in the teaching, learning and research activities in the university environment. A case study of the University of Zululand Library was conducted through survey data collected from a sample population of academic staff and randomly selected evaluation forms completed by students. The results of the survey showed the overwhelming response from UNIZULU library users to the newly developed information services system. The challenges, opportunities and partnerships between the library and other university stakeholders (e.g. research, teaching and learning divisions) are also discussed.

Keywords

Library instruction, information literacy, research support, academic libraries, University of Zululand

Introduction

The major role of academic libraries is to support the teaching, learning and research activities of their respective universities. With seismic changes in the educational landscape stemming from #feesmustfall, the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), massive budget cuts and other issues, libraries are re-orienting themselves in order to remain relevant. Now more than ever, the library has to fight for its place in the university and to constantly reinvent and introduce new information services to cater for its users.

For librarians at the University of Zululand (UNIZULU), this scenario is all too familiar. Serving a student population of 17,693 students, 1,183 of whom are postgraduate students (Honours, Masters' and Doctorate) and 16,510 undergraduates, librarians at the institution continue to play a pivotal role in the development of modern information services for undergraduates, postgraduates, academics and researchers. With a small staff consisting of professional librarians, the library set in motion training workshops targeted at its users. These workshops cover topics ranging from 'Know your library', to e-resources, plagiarism, publishing and referencing. The workshops are carried out in computer laboratories and lecture halls on campus, but most of them are done in the library's computer laboratory.

By introducing these services, the UNIZULU library has migrated from what Raju and Schoombee (2013: 28) refer to as a "pull philosophy" to the "push philosophy" by taking its services to its users".

Against this backdrop, it is the aim of this paper to determine whether these workshops/ services have had any impact on students and academics alike.

Literature review

One of the recurring themes of the changing role of the academic librarian has been the teaching of information literacy, as it is increasingly being seen as central to enhancing students' learning and critical thinking (Bryan 2016). Its importance is stressed by Shao & Purpur (2016), who argue that students' success, both academically and professionally, is predicated on how information literate they are. The authors maintain that librarians, being experts in information management, should be at the forefront of this process. With these new responsibilities, librarians have had to acquire new skills through workshops, informal engagements, personal development initiatives, seminars, conferences, research and self-training (Raju & Schoombee, 2013; Pasipamire, 2015). Westbrook & Fabian (2010) assert that on the job training and self-teaching provided librarians with the necessary skills to teach. Some of these skills include communication or people skills, creativity or innovation, collaboration, and marketing (Schwartz 2016). At the University of Zululand, skills development is mainly achieved through in-house training and knowledge sharing in a teamwork environment.

For most universities, research has become a strategic priority, and there is pressure on these institutions to produce more research in order to improve their rankings. Pasipamire (2015) maintains that the librarian's role in the research process is so crucial that it has moved from being a supporter of the research process, to being a contributor. Commenting on Schoombee's (2013:15) six stages of the research life cycle (preparation, gathering, creation, preservation, sharing and measuring), Pasipamire (2015) argues that it is at the gathering stage that information librarians can offer researchers more targeted services, such as helping them to find information in their respective areas. Furthermore, the author acknowledges that, of late, librarians are also becoming more involved in the measurement stage, where they provide training and advice on h-index, bibliometrics, publishing and more.

Although there are no specific models with new roles and services for academic libraries, ACRL (2011) has provided guidelines and standards for the development of suitable models (Raju & Adam, 2015). Thus, Ocholla (2016:2) recommends that each academic library should choose a strategy for providing current, tailor-made facilities, products and services to fit their individual university needs, budgets and priorities. At the UNIZULU library, modern information services are offered in the form of workshops such as Turnitin; advanced search techniques for e-resources; referencing management tools (Endnote or Mendeley); social networks for researchers; publishing and visibility.

Evaluating library performance and its impact is something that librarians have been doing for a long time (Han, Wong & Webb 2011), so much so that professional bodies like ARL and ACRL have come up with various assessment tools ranging from surveys on users' opinions to statistical analyses. Shao and Purpur (2016) support that, librarians should empirically assess the impact of their training on students. Be that as it may, some authors feel that much of the assessments that are done by libraries are half-hearted and lack empirical evidence (Matthew 2015). For the UNIZULU library, evaluation forms are distributed at the end of each training workshop in order to elicit responses from the attendees. Like all evaluation/assessment exercises, this data helps to inform decisions on what changes should be implemented.

There is extant literature on the positive impact of library instruction on students and researchers alike. Among the most recent studies, Liu, Lo and Itsumura (2016) carried out a study on students' perception of library workshops, and the response from students was very positive. The students identified instruction on e-books or e-resources as particularly helpful to them.

In a survey conducted at Oregon and Purdue Universities, Shao and Purpur (2016) determined that students who attended library instruction workshops enhanced their critical thinking skills. Studies by Vance, Kirk and Gardner (2012) and Kot and Jones (2014) both found that students who attended library instruction workshops utilised most of the library resources and therefore had higher Grade Point Averages (GPA) than those who did not. Similarly, Wong and Cmor (2011) analysed library workshop attendance and the graduation GPA of 8000 students, and found that library instruction seemed to have a positive impact on GPA, suggesting that attending multiple library workshops impacts positively on academic success. Bowles-Terry (2012) examined the connection between student academic success and information literacy instruction. The students in the study disclosed that some of the skills gained during their library instruction training assisted them with their research projects. Madukoma et al. (2013) conducted a similar study on library instruction and the academic performance of undergraduate students at Babcock University in Nigeria, where the majority of respondents stated that library instruction had a positive effect on their academic performance.

However, in order for library instruction to be fully appreciated, the library needs to partner and work closely with other stakeholders in the institution. Pham and Tanner

(2014) maintain that library-faculty collaborations not only give the library a chance to show off its expertise, but also helps to develop and enrich students' information and lifelong learning skills.

4. UNIZULU context

The UNIZULU library, like other academic libraries, has been trying to find new ways to survive in the competitive technologically advanced information environment. The results of a preliminary study carried out by information librarians on UNIZULU researchers to assess the current situation and users' needs, determined the need to develop and maintain relevant, high-quality services, resources and facilities, underscoring the need for change.

The UNIZULU library started by re-designing and creating new library spaces, specifically the Research Commons (for researchers, Masters and PhD students) and Info Cellar (space with networked computers for all students, particularly undergraduates). After evaluating its roles and position in the university structure, the UNIZULU library developed a new system for providing information services with only a few information librarians in the form of library workshops. These workshops are focused on research support (for postgraduate students and researchers) and teaching and learning support (for undergraduate students and academics).

In describing the workshops, Ocholla (2016:5) explains that "information librarians selected the topics which were suitable for UNIZULU researchers", such as plagiarism, referencing management tools (e.g. Endnote and Mendeley), social networks for researchers, publishing, visibility, research metrics and others, to provide support at different stages of the research lifecycle. Suitable topics were also explored and developed for undergraduate students and lecturers (such as plagiarism, e-resources and referencing) to support teaching and learning.

In order to provide such services, Ocholla (2016:7) states that "information librarians performed their own knowledge audit to map those with advanced skills/knowledge, ranging from social media to bibliometrics, open access or referencing tools for knowledge sharing". The newly introduced services were widely marketed and publicised through social media, library displays, posters, library presentations at faculty board meetings, research workshops and staff inductions.

New partnerships were established between the library and Research and Innovations, the Teaching and Learning Centre, and faculty deans, to mention a few. These partnerships (that sometimes blossomed into collaborations) were highly effective in reaching the academic community at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Ocholla (2016: 5) adds that the UNIZULU's information librarians opened a file on Google plus to manage their workshops. This file "mirrors the activities related to the requested training workshops" and is used for statistical, planning and report writing purposes. Table 1 below gives a summary of the workshops conducted in 2015, highlighting the number of students who attended the various workshops and their respective departments.

Library Workshops	No.	Attend	Arts	Sci	Edu	CAL	UG	PG	Acad
e-Resources, tips for searching and more!	32	604	395	142	14	50	444	137	23
Everything you need to know about eBooks	2	35	35				35		
Finding Theses and Dissertations : ETD	5	49	49				35	14	
ILL : Saving Time with Pre-Request	3	5	4				1	1	1
Know your library	10	160	121	16		23	50	110	
Publishing your research	1	4	4					4	
Publishing, Impact factor &visibility	1	2	1						1
Referencing made easy with Endnote	12	122	107		15		16	69	36
Referencing made easy with Mendeley	12	322	169	118	15	8	160	26	29
Researchers Social Networking	2	9	8				1		1
Stay away from Plagiarism	29	836	659	124	14	27	728	95	13
The use of Multimedia/AV materials	2	30	30				30		
Turnitin : Plagiarism Checker	7	110	67	14	13	7	51	18	11
Total	118	2288	1649	414	71	115	1552	474	115

Table 1	: L	ibrary	workshops	. 2015
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3. Methodology

This case study sought to examine the impact of the new information services offered by the library to support teaching, learning and research activities at the University of Zululand. The instruments for data collection consisted of questionnaires and document reviews. The population of this study included academics.

A short questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data from the academics. The questionnaire contained questions on demographics; reasons for visiting the library; workshops students and academics have attended; rating of students' performance after attending the workshops; perceptions of the relevance of the services; and suggestions and recommendations for improvement. Purposive sampling was employed to select the academics. The study targeted academics who were actively involved in encouraging students to attend library training workshops. These academics were identified through the Google file. For this study, all the lecturers who had more than one workshop request in 2016 were identified as active participants. In total, 51 lecturers had made requests for training workshops in 2016, but only 24 were identified as active. Questionnaires were either emailed or hand delivered to these lecturers. A total of 20 lecturers responded. The main challenge encountered in the study was eliciting responses from the academics.

With regards to students, simple random sampling was employed to select participants. Evaluation forms were randomly selected and reviewed to gather data on the students' perceptions of the services. At the end of each training session, students were asked to rate the importance of the service to their studies and suggest possible ways of improving delivery. Thirty (30) evaluation forms collected in 2016 were randomly selected to correlate data for this study.

Observations were also conducted by authors of this paper over a period of six months. The authors, who are information services librarians and whose responsibilities include the training of students to improve information access, observed how the students used the services after training and how it impacted on their studies. The authors also took notice of follow-up queries brought by students and questions regarding the new services.

5. Findings

In this study, the main objectives were:

- To establish the impact of the new library services on teaching, learning and research
- To establish the perceptions of users towards these services (based on the library workshops)
- 5.1. Academics' responses

In order to address the first objective, a questionnaire was distributed to academics who repeatedly made use of our services.

The profile of the academics shows that most of the respondents were lecturers (Figure 1).

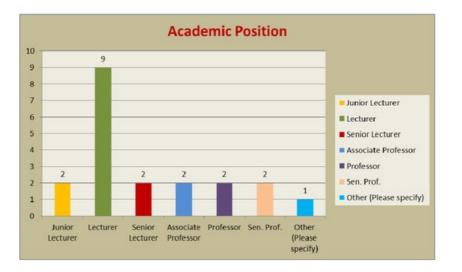
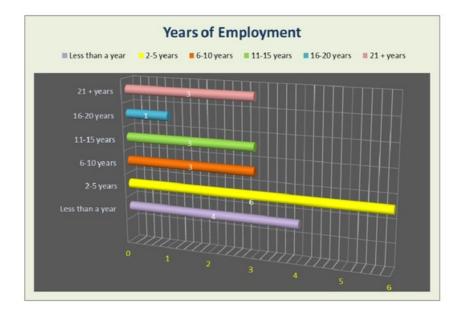


Figure 1: Academic position

Figure 2: Years of employment



Most of the respondents were employed at the University of Zululand for between 2 to 5 years, with about 35% (7) of respondents having been with the university for over eleven years.

As highlighted in Figure 3, most of the respondents were from the Faculty of Commerce, Administration and Law, followed by the Faculty of Arts.

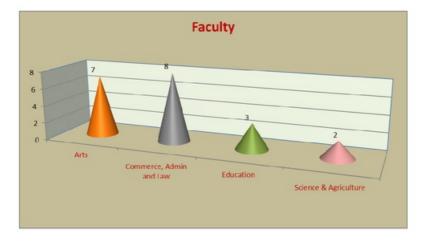
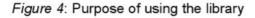
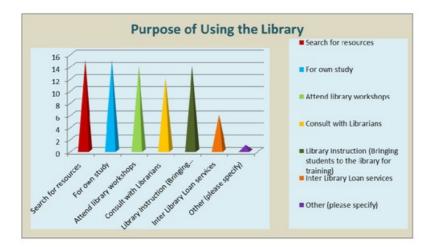


Figure 3: Faculty affiliation

Figure 4 below illustrates the purpose of using the library. The academics used the library to: search for resources, mainly for their own study and for library instruction; attend library workshops; consult with librarians; and for inter-library loans.





When asked about which workshops they had booked for their students, plagiarism proved to be the most popular, followed by e-resources, 'Know your library', and referencing as illustrated in figure 5.

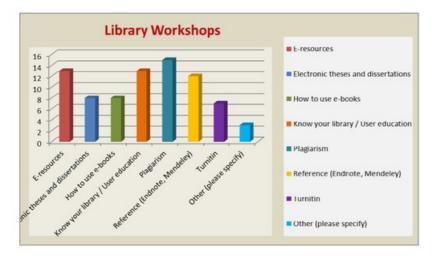




Figure 6 shows that the impact of the workshops on students' performance was generally viewed to be very positive. 'Know your library' was rated as very helpful, followed by e-resources, referencing, turnitin, ETDs, and e-Books. Funding opportunities based on Research Africa was the least popular.

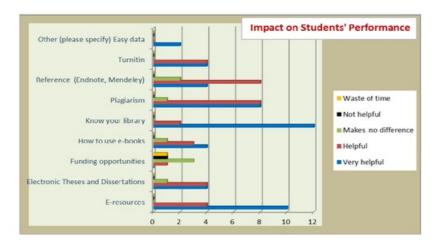


Figure 6: Relevance and impact of individual workshops

About 19 (95%) respondents further explained that they noticed an improvement in students' performance and 1 (5%) indicated that it was average. The majority of respondents rated the workshops as "informative", with some indicating that they were "helpful with visible and invisible benefits", and some noting that the workshops were "essential for research".

Under suggestions and recommendations, issues of time allocation, practical work, and necessity of these training programs to be included in the curriculum were highlighted. Librarians were praised for a job well done (e.g. "The library is at the top of its game!).

5.2. Students' responses

In order to address the second research objective of this study on the perceptions of users towards the library workshops, 30 evaluation forms were randomly selected from the workshops attended by students in 2016.

Students' responses showed that the most attended workshop was referencing (Endnote), followed by e-resources, 'Know your library', plagiarism and turnitin (Figure 7).

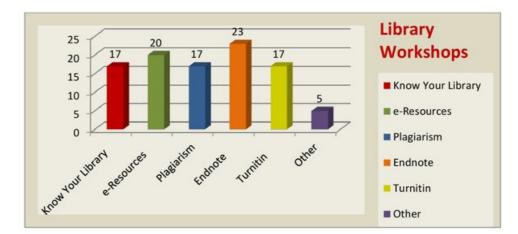


Figure 7: Workshops attended by students

Regarding the question on whether the workshops were informative or not, the majority indicated that the workshops were very informative (16) and informative (14) as shown in Figure 8.

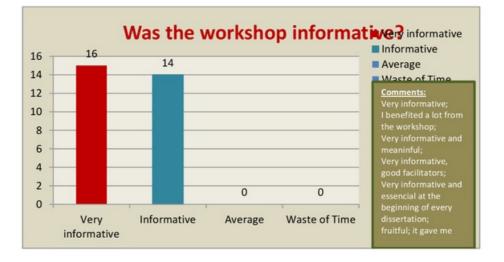
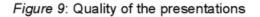
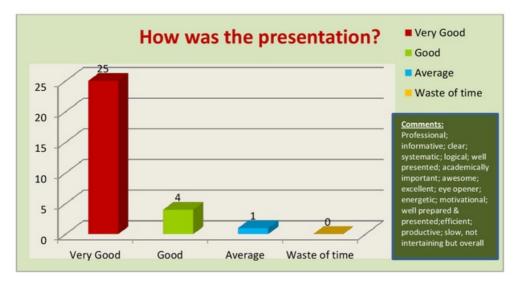


Figure 8: Perceptions of the workshops

Regarding the quality of the presentations (Figure 9), the students rated the presentations as very good (25), good (4), and average (1).





Some of the respondents found everything to be interesting during the training sessions, while others pinpointed referencing, turnitin, plagiarism, and e-resources to be most useful. Regarding facilities, most of the participants rated the training facilities as good and convenient, but some indicated that the computers were slow.

On the question of what should be improved, the responses were very different, from "organising more and longer workshops", to "providing training packs", "making it compulsory for every student", "provision of refreshments", "more practical work with specific assignments", and "improvement of marketing strategies", among others.

Students suggested that "more people should attend to improve research output at the institution"; making use of videos; longer training sessions; making it compulsory for all students; more interactive and mentally engaging sessions; and improving the marketing of the workshops. Others were satisfied with the current information services, calling it "amazing" and "good work".

Conclusion and recommendations

The academics found the workshops to be quite useful for both themselves and their students. The workshops helped to improve their students' performance as well as their teaching experiences. The students found the workshops useful, informative and relevant, and appreciated the initiatives of the librarians. Both the academics and students acknowledged the high level of presentation, skills, and knowledge of the librarians. The most useful topics in the presentations, from the academics' perspective, were: 'Know your library', e-resources, and plagiarism. Students found most of the presentations to be relevant, with referencing, turnitin, plagiarism, and e-resources topping the list. Most of the participants found the facilities appropriate.

With the help of this study, it was possible to establish that the newly introduced system of library workshops is not only appreciated by academics and students', but also positively impacts on students' performance. Information librarians' have also benefited considerably from the whole process, echoing George Gurdjieff's¹ famous assertion that, "by teaching others you will learn yourself". Among the important

¹ http://www.awaken.com/2013/06/quotes-by-george-gurdjieff

lessons, it was possible to: clearly identify and address user information needs for specific categories more effectively; improve information services to support research, and teaching and learning with a focused approach on user needs; effectively reach more library users with only a few information librarians; develop new coverage of topics for library training; confirm the positive impact of a service on students' academic performance; get responses from the students about the new services; establish new and solid partnerships within the university structure (e.g. with Research and Innovation, Teaching and Learning, etc.); improve library visibility and necessity; and enrich the information librarians' knowledge, skills, accountability, attitudes and confidence.

It was further observed that knowledge, skills and staffing require attention - the team of information librarians is understaffed; well-trained librarians are leaving for other institutions; new staff needs time to be trained; and the marketed service needs to be sustained on a high level. It was also evident that information librarians' knowledge and skills need to be constantly developed and updated in order for them to be able to provide a high quality of training.

The training facilities also need to be improved. The library's computer laboratory can only accommodate 30 people. This highlights the challenge of accommodating large classes of students. Academics and information librarians resort to identifying alternative venues such as lecture halls and computer laboratories to accommodate large groups. Alternatively, large classes have to be divided into groups, which take more time and effort from all – the lecturers to allocate their lessons and organize students to attend, and the librarians to book the library venue which is in high demand, especially when library orientation is taking place. Library computer laboratory facilities need significant improvement.

The information librarians noticed that computer literacy is still a problem for students and in some cases, staff. For example, the e-learning system Moodle is only used by a small number of academics and students, which makes it difficult for librarians to provide support. Finally, existing library collaborations/ co-operations should be maintained, and new ones developed. It is recommended that:

- An information literacy course that is taught by librarians should be implemented in the curriculum for all 1st year students to improve their performance
- The compulsory induction of postgraduate students should include all library workshops that support research
- Library staffing needs to be addressed to enable the provision of quality information services on different levels; support teaching and learning; and support research
- Librarians' training needs should become a priority, especially new areas such as Research Data Management (RDM), Open Access (OA), and library publishing, to name a few
- Training facilities need to be uplifted, and new facilities with greater capacity have to be designed in the library
- Online and print training packs need to be prepared and provided
- Librarians and academics should work together on electronic learning system (ELS) to support online teaching and learning

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