THE LOW LIBRARY USAGE BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A CASE ON ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY MIDLANDS REGIONAL LIBRARY, GWERU, ZIMBABWE

MthokozisiMasumbika Ncube[*]

Abstract

The Zimbabwe Open University Midlands regional library acts as a back bone for the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Region, as it has in place resources and services meant to cater for the diverse library needs of its stakeholders, at the same time encouraging extensive study habits and life-long learning. However, there is a very low usage of library resources and services by the university students. Therefore this pragmatic research intended to establish the reasons behind this low usage and recommend measures that can be taken to increase the student's use of the library, through the use of a case study research design. The study used semi-structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis to collect data. The study identified that some of the resources within the library did not meet the needs of the students, and also that the library was inconveniently located, thus making it difficult for most students to visit and use the library. Therefore, for the library to be deemed relevant, the research recommends that relevant resources be acquired in the library. Also the research recommends that the library be relocated to a more strategic position, to enable maximum utilization by students.

Key words

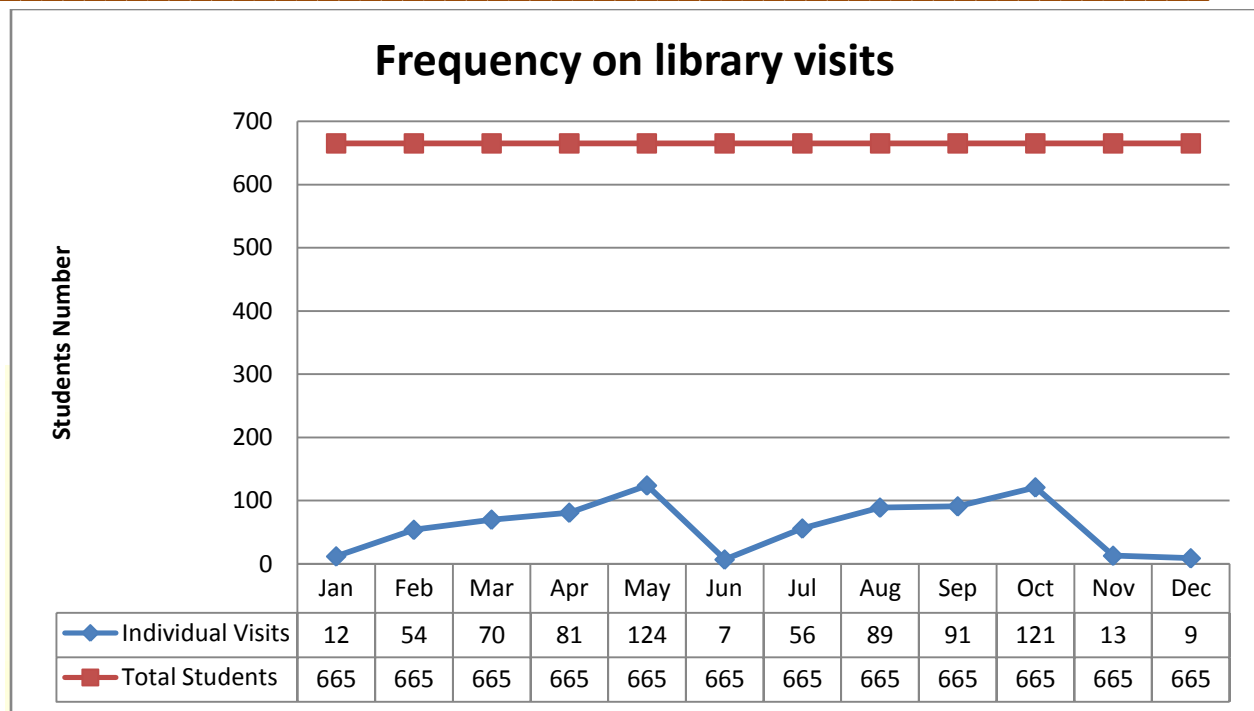**Zimbabwe Open University, Midlands library, information needs, library usage**

---

[*] Department of Library and Information Science, Zimbabwe Open University

A Quarterly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.
International Journal of Research in Social Sciences
http://www.ijmra.us

99

1.0 Introduction and background

According toBhatti, et.al. (2013:1) a library is a gateway of knowledge and education, offering vast information to users, playing a vital role in education, at the time contributing to the students'development in their information literacy and support in the learning process, such that any given library is expected to have an influx of researchers and readers at any given interval. Concurring with this insight, Ramasodi (2009:11) notes that academic libraries, also known as university or college librariesare libraries attached to academic institutions, which support the teaching and research needs of students and staff members. This entails that academic libraries are there to serve and meet the user needs and expectations. In such a view an academic library is expected to have an extensive number of students during the semester and even off-semester, as they are essential to the core mission of a college or university they serve (Soria, et.al. 2013, p.148).

Bouazza and Mufaraji (2005) observing at the school library use by teachers, found that 36% of the respondents use the library once a week. Similarly, Shokeen and Kaushik (2002), focusing on the information-seeking behaviour of social scientists, found that a large majority of respondents visited the library daily and a significant number twice a week. Singh (2002) conducting a study on faculty members at the University of Delhi found that nearly 60% of the respondents visit the library two-to-four times a week. Yusuf and Iwu (2010:5) in their research established that 35.7% of student respondents use the library daily, while 53.3% of student respondents visit the library 2 to 3 times a week and 3.9% of student respondents visit the library 2 to 3 times a month. From these statistics in can be deduced that quite a substantial number of college and university students visit and use academic libraries extensively. Conversely, corresponding to the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands regional library the usage is extremely low as compared to these statistics. From 665 total number of studentsin the university in year 2014; the library had only 727 total number of individual visits for the whole year of 2014, from a potential 7 890 visits (665 number of students x 12 months). This entails that the library only had 9.1% visits [(727 visits / 12 months) / 665 total number of students]. The graph below denotes this statistical trendand distribution of individual visits to the library:

Frequency on library visits

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Individual Visits	12	54	70	81	124	7	56	89	91	121	13	9
Total Students	665	665	665	665	665	665	665	665	665	665	665	665

Figure 1: Distribution of individual library visits

From the above diagram it can be noted that there are far lesser students that visited the library as compare to the total number of students that were within the university. Therefore the researcher intended to bridge this gap that exists between the number of library student users and the total number of potential library users (that is the total number of students) by identifying the causal effect of this indifference, and recommending measures that can be undertaken to address this problem.

In order to better understand the use of academic libraries, it is pertinent to appreciate what a library user is.Nwalo (2003) delineates a library user as anybody who visits the library with the purpose of exploiting its resources to satisfy his/her information need. Adding to this insight, Aina (2004) perceives the library user to include all those who avail themselves to the services offered by a library. Mathews (2009) also goes on to categorize library users according to their use of the library, as follows:

> The Connoisseurs – This group has a profound appreciation for libraries. They know how to search the databases and turn to them often. Compared to the other groups, connoisseurs have higher expectations, and perhaps unrealistic desires, of what the

A Quarterly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.
International Journal of Research in Social Sciences
http://www.ijmra.us

101

library should be. The Regulars – These students are in the library daily or at least several times a week. For them the library is a destination, a place that is both part of their standard routine and an outlet for social and scholarly activities. Irregular Guests – These students only go to the library when they have to. They are occasional visitors who use the library for a particular function: studying before a test, meeting with a group, or checking out a book on course reserve. The Vacationers – These students typically use the library as a resting stop during the day; it is a convenient place to check e-mail, grab a coffee, meet a friend, and perhaps glance over a textbook. The Invisibles – These students simply have no interest in the library, or rather in what they perceive the library has to offer, no matter what we have to say about it.

Therefore comparisons between Figure 1 and the above notion, it can be deduced that the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands regional library has a problem of library users who range in between irregular guests and invisible guests.

Adhering to user needs, Echezonam (2011:2) asserts that the library user is the principalpoint to the 21st epoch, as the library primarily exists to satisfy the user prerequisites and anticipations; hence this is the reason why the mission statement of any library continuouslyechoes the determination of the library in rendering excellent services to its user community.This therefore entails that any given library has to offer adequate services that the users can exploit, such that if users are not exploiting the services of a given library the particular library would be providing irrelevant services in addressing their needs, accordingly not fulfilling its mission statement. In harmony with this insight, Hawkins and Baker (2005:470) note that needs refer to required elements for students to achieve specificinformational and educational objectives. Adding to this sentiment,Lohar and Kumbar (2002) on their research found out that a majority of students visit the library to consult textbooks or reference books and to read newspapers or popular magazines. However, Blackwood,et. al. (1991) adhering to readinghabits of college seniors, discovered that the majority of students were reading for pleasure, reading mainlynewspapers, with most of them spending more time reading during holidays thanwhen lessons were in session.In their study, nearly 70%of the library users consulted the library catalogue to identify the sources and services which the library had in place. In addition, a study by Rajagopal (1989) found that 80% of library users use the library more than once a week, with more than three-quarters not satisfied

with the arrangement of reading material on the shelves, and 83% not satisfied with the collection. With these views in mind, the researcher intended to identify and reveal the needs which the Midlands region students subscribe to, such thatit could be easy to assess whether the Midlands regional library is providing relevant informational resources.

Remarking on resources and services within a library, Mathews (2009) postulates that to be user-centered, a library has to be more than just a great channel for academic services; it should provide a rich atmosphere that supports cultural, social, leisure, and creative activities as well. This therefore entails that a library should have different resources and services to support the diverse needs of its users. Matthews (2009) also adds the succeeding:

> If our goal is to increase student usage and time spent in the library, then we have to focus constantly on student need fulfilment by offering a diversity of spaces, programming, products, services, and experiences, each designed to accommodate their shifting moods and priorities. In short, we need to give them new reasons to use the library. We can present the library in many different ways: instead of just for doing research, it is the place to start, revise, and finish an assignment. It is a pit stop during the day and a quiet couch late in the afternoon. It is a place to plug in literally to the Web and figuratively to new ideas, advice, and experiences. The library is a shrine of solitude, designed for introspection, discovery, and preparation.

From this argument, it can be concluded that a library has to have sundry innovative facilities that would not only cater for the educational needs but also for other variedneeds that individuals can subscribe to.

Therefore in this regard, a number of research questions were conscripted to understand the reasons behind this problem and recommend measures that the library can undertake to enable the library to have connoisseurs and regular users. The following questions were drafted: What are the needs which different students at the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Region correspond to in relation to the library?What are the sources and services being offered by the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Region library in meeting the needs of its user?Are the sources and services at the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Region library effective in

satisfying the user needs? Which measures can the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Region library put in place to ensure user satisfaction?

2.0 Area ofstudy and methodology

The study was limited to the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), which is an institution of higher learning. In essence, the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is a distance teaching and learning institution, with ten regional centers located in each and every province in Zimbabwe. Within these regional centers are libraries, which were established to support the regional centers. In the Midlands region, the university also has a regional center, which has a library located in Gweru; therefore this research wascentered on this particular regional center. The research focused on low library usage at Zimbabwe Open University Midlands regional library. This study was also limited to the students and staff members of the above mentioned library.

The methodology that was employed related to a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches (mixed methodology). The researcher used the concurrent embedded mixed methodology, whereby the qualitative research approach was used mostly, while incorporating some elements of quantitative research approach. The qualitative approachenabled the generation of rich, detailed data that left the participants' perspectives intact, while the embedded quantitative approachenabled the production of quantifiable, reliable data that could be generalized to a large population. The qualitative research methodology informed the research design, which was a case study. This enabled the research to investigate the contemporary phenomenon, in this case the ZOU midlands library,within its real-life context. In other words, the case study was used as the researcher could not manipulate the individuals involved in the study; and also the case contextual conditions were relevant to the study, that is the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Regional library. As the research was supposed to use the university students as the target population, therefore because the size of this population, it became appropriate for the researcher to sample this population, with the convenience sampling technique that is used mostly in qualitative research approach being used. In essence, the study used participants as the researcher came across them within the university.The staff members at Midlands Regional werealso conveniently sampled as the researcher came across them in the research process.

This approach concurs with that which was conducted by Sarrafzadeh (2008), who used this methodology through two phases; with phase one relating to library users, while phase two adhering to the library staff members. In Sarrafzadeh(2008), phase one consisted of a survey, conducted via distribution of questionnaires; hence this research also used semi-structured questionnaires which embedded quantitative data (thus elements of the quantitative approach) as the first phase. This entailed collecting and analysing qualitative and quantitative data that provided relative information about the students in relation to the study. Sarrafzadeh (2008) used the library management as the basis for phase two in his research, which entailed collecting and analysing specific qualitative data through semi-structured in-depth telephone and face-to-face interviews with library and information science professionals. In such a respect, this researchused this approach also as phase two, which entailed conducting semi structured informal interviewswith the Midlands Regional non-library staff members, and library staff members (Senior Library Assistants). In addition the research also used observations, which enabled the researcher to ascertain the services which library users received and the resources which they corresponded to. The researcher also analysed documents that related to the statistics of library usage.

3.0 Findings and discussions

This research was divided into segments with the first subdivision observing the needs of the Zimbabwe Open University students in conforming to the library; with the second section identifying the resources and services in place at the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands regional library; and the third division focusing on the effectiveness of the resources and services in satisfying the needs of the users.

3.1 The types of library user needs

The research established that students need the library to support their research and educational endeavours; with 54% noting that they need the library for assignments writing, with21% needing the library for discussion.This also corresponds with what Bhatti, et.al. (2013:8) note in their research as they found out that students frequently use the library for class assignments and exam preparation. The study through questionnaires also recognized that a great number of

students need resources that support their personal development;the major reason for such a need is the fact that a majority of the students are adults that require self-enrichment, with approximately 31% of the total respondentsbeing in the age group between 31 years – 40 years and48 % of the total respondents being in the age group between 41 years – 50 year. In that same note the research also found out that students also required resources that support theirwork, occupation or career. This was also denoted by the fact that a majority of individuals were employed; as approximately 77% of the respondents being employed, while 14% of respondents being self-employed andonly 9% being unemployed. This relates to the notion that is signified by Echezonam(2011:4), when he says that people need information to enrich themselves and remain relevant to their society, career, or organization, and every professional requires up-to-date knowledge in his/her chosen profession, and information relating to better jobs.

The research also found out that students needed newspapers and magazines for their day to day reading habits; and this was noted by 70% of respondents from the questionnaires. This insight conforms to whatGallik (1999) in his study discoveredas he institutes thatmagazines are the prevalent type of reading material for casual reading, with 75% of the college students reading such magazines. While corresponding to newspapers, Echezonam (2011:4) notes thatpeople seek information to know what is happening on in their government and in their state. They want to keep up-to-date with government policies and plans and discern how it affects them.The other need which respondents subscribed to conformed to communication; in essence, 47% of respondents noted that they needed the library for communicating with other fellow students. This corresponds to Mathews' (2009) insight when he states that a visit to the library should not be restricted to fulfilling research needs but should allow occasions to snatch a snack, chatter with friends, take a rest, watch a movie, or listen to aninspiring speaker.

The study also found that computers are a key figure in students' library usage. This was noted by approximately 84% of respondents that point out that they needed the library to enhance computer skill, with approximately 74% needing the library for electronic resources facilities, while approximately 46% needing the library for uploading and downloading documents, and approximately 38% of respondents indicated that they needed the library for electronic mail

facilities. This actually synchronises with the insight by Karim and Hasan (2007:288) who designate that the emergence of the new digital environment has also captured the interest of many researchers, with a growing amount of reading time spent more onskimming and browsing for information on the internet.As Echezonam (2011:4) denounces that people require knowledge or information in order to know what to do at any point in time, as every problem at hand requires information as the solution; the study also found out that study students needed information about assorted ways of solving problems, with approximately 26% of the respondents indicating this aspect. In addition to this aspect approximately 29% of the respondents noted that they need information of health issues. This was also observed by Echezonam (2011:4) who notes that library users need information on how to stay healthy and also basic understand of medical conditions.

3.2 Resources and services found in the library

Through the interviews with the library personnel and observations, the research found that the library has in place books that cater for each faculty in the university. The essence of supporting the university was noted by Bhatti, et.al (2013:8) who suggest that the university library is a significant source for knowledge, education, and research; supporting the academic requirements of the users.The study found that the university library also subscribes to a number of electronic resources, which include electronic journals and electronic books. In accord with the importance of electronic resources in libraries, Jiao et al., (2009) indicate that libraries in China have in place digital collection, providing online access to the students, providing informationfrom electronic resources for learning and educational purposes.The study also found that the library has different reference sources, these included dictionaries, acts of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe parliament debates, encyclopaedias, and maps.These resources are essential in a library, as Lohar and Kumbar(2002) in their study found that a majority of respondents visit the library to consulttextbooks or reference materials.

The research also found that the library subscribes to a Zimbabwe daily newspaper (The Herald). Corresponding to the importance of newspapers, Karim and Hasan (2007:291) in their research found out that the majority of thestudents read newspapers every dayfor at least a few times a week. Through observations and interviews with the library staff, the research also discovered

that the library has in place different modules that are used by the university to impart knowledge. In addition, the research also found that the library has qualified personnel in the field of library and information science. Remarking on the essence of skilled staff members, Bhatti, et.al (2013:9) in their research conclusions note that lack of guidance by staff and careless attitude of staff can hinder students from visiting the library. In addition, from observation, the study found that the general library environment is clean and quiet, hence conducive for reading. The importance of environment was noted byBhatti, et.al. (2013:9)in their recommendations when they say that the IslamiaUniversity of Bahawalpur library environment should be more clean, comfortable and quiet to improve the services of the library. The study also found that the university also provides circulation and current awareness services to its various patrons.

3.3 The effectiveness of resources and services in meeting user needs

While all respondents had indicated that they needed the library for diverse needs, however, 60% of the respondents noted that they have never used the library. The reasons for not using the library varied, the following is a general summary of the results:

i. The library is inconveniently located, that is at a second floor building without a lift or an elevator;

ii. The other reason was that the students perceived that since the library was located in the Central Business District of Gweru, therefore it was bound to be noisy, hence preferred to visit other libraries which the university is within a consortia with,that are located in the outskirts;

iii. Some students did not know the resources and services which the library offers, such that they could not conform to it;

iv. The library was also perceived as offering intellectual information only, without addressing other social needs, hence they conformed to other information service providers like internet cafes that offered a conducive environment for socialisation;

v. The library operational time was inconvenient for most students as they both work and have families;in essence, most of the students are bound to be at work during the operational time, while during weekends they needed to spendtime with families;

vi. Some respondents noted that they had internet services at their work places and home, hence used such services instead of visiting the library.

From the 40% who have used the library at a certain period; 70% of them designated that thebooks in the libraryprovide relevant informational resources for their research and educational endeavours. From the 30% who indicated that the library did not provide relevant books for their needs, the following is a general summary of the results:

i. The books in the library were out-dated, hence did not conform to their current informational needs;

ii. The books did not have adequate subject coverage;

iii. Some noted that they could not locate the specific titles that corresponded to their areas of specialisation as the library did not have an effective catalogue;

iv. Some respondents noted that other books had missing relevant pages;

v. Others denoted that they needed fictional books, like novels and folklores, which the library did not have in stock; hence the library stockdid not support extra-curricular reading habits and life-long learning.

The study also found that most students did not know that the university subscribes to different electronic resources; this was signified by an approximate of 63% of respondents. The study also found that since the library and computer laboratory are spaciously located, hence some students preferred to use the computer laboratory and not visit the library. It should be noted that from the 40% who have used the library, approximately 29% of the respondents were discontent with the manual circulation system, as they felt that the library should have automated its resources like other universities.

Adhering to the modules, though students are given these upon registration, however, the study found that students needed the library to have in place more modules to cater for their needs, as some noted that they register quite late, thus needing the library to assist with the modules. Corresponding to the daily papers that the library subscribes to, the study found out that students needed different newspaper articles from different papers. In essence, the research discovered that instead of the library subscribing to the Herald newspaper and Sunday Mail (state paper); it should incorporate other privately owned media or papers.

4.0 Conclusions

The following are the research conclusion emanated from the research findings about the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands regional library:

i. Students conform to the library not only for educational and information needs, but also need the library for other needs, like social and recreational needs;

ii. The library location plays a critical role in enabling students to visit library;

iii. The library is not adequately marketed, such that most students are not aware of its service and product offerings;

iv. Most of the library book resources are out-dated, hence repelling students from using the library;

v. Students need internet facilities, thus lack of internet connectivity in the library computers also prevents students from making use of the library, thus preferring to use the university computer laboratory;

vi. Automation and library management systems play a role in augmenting library usage.

5.0 Recommendations

The following are the recommended mechanisms that the library should put in place to attract extensive usage of its resources and services:

i. The library should put in place diverse library marketing and promotion initiatives to attract students;

ii. To accommodate the other library user needs, the library should also put in place a separate room, that can be used by students for discussions and other social endeavours;

iii. The library should automate its resources, and have a library management system to enhance its effectiveness;

iv. Other than depending on the computer laboratory, which is spaciously located from the library, the library should connect all of its computer resources to the internet to enhance service delivery;

v. The library should also conduct information literacy skills towards its user community to ensure maximum library usage;

vi. The library should also either make effort to have the elevator fixed, or relocate to a more convenient site;

A Quarterly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.

International Journal of Research in Social Sciences
http://www.ijmra.us

110

vii.   The library should acquire recent books to attract library usage;

viii.   The library should undertake continuous user survey to identify the changing needs of its user community.

References

Aina, L.O. et.al.2004. Poor reading habits among Nigerians: the role of libraries. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.

Bhatti, R. et.al.2013. Pervasiveness and Purposes of Library Usage by LIS Students at the IslamiaUniversity of Bahawalpur, Multan.Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal).Paper 940.

Biddix 2013.Educational Research: planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River: Pearson.

Blackwood, C.et. al. 1991."Pleasure reading by college students: fact or fiction?" paper presented at the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Lexington, KY. November 13-15.

Bouazza, A., and Mufaraji, M. 2005.Use of school libraries by teachers: the case of Oman. Libri 55(2): 140-147.

Chiwanza, K. and Chiwanza, M.B. 2011.Marketing of information services. Mount Pleasant: Zimbabwe Open University.

Echezonam, I.A. 2011.The anatomy of library users in the 21st century. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.

Gallik, J. D. 1999. Do they read for pleasure? recreational reading habits of college students.Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 42(6), 480-488.

Hawkins, G.W. and Baker, J.D. 2005. Online learner expectations.Encyclopaedia ofdistance learning. Hershey, PA: Idea Group Reference.

Jiao, S., et.al.2009. Chinese academic libraries from the perspective of international students studying in China. The International Information & Library Review, 41,1-11.

Karim, N. S. A.andHasan, A. 2007.Reading habits and attitude in the digital age: analysis of gender and academic program differences in Malaysia. TheElectronic Library. 25 (3), 285 – 298.

Lohar, M. S., andKumbar, M. 2002. Use of library facilities and information resources in Sahyadri College, Shimogo (Karnataka).Annals of Library and Information Studies 49(3): 73-87.

A Quarterly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.
International Journal of Research in Social Sciences
http://www.ijmra.us

111

Mathews, B. 2009.Marketing today's academic library: a bold new approach to communicating with students. Chicago: ALA Editions.

Narman, F. 2001.The intra-cluster correlation coefficient in cluster randomization. British Medical Journal.

Nengomasha, C.T. 2013.Advocacy and marketing work in libraries and information centres. Mount Pleasant: Zimbabwe Open University.

Nwalo, K.I.N. 2003.Fundamentals of library practice: a manual on library routines. Ibadan: Sterling-Horden Publishers Ltd.

Rajgopal, B. 1989.User survey of SrikrishnaDevaraya University library. Library Herald 28(1-2): 17-25.

Ramasodi 2009.The information needs of student library users and the fulfilment thereof at the University of South Africa. South Africa: University of South Africa.

Sarrafzadeh, M. 2008.Implications of knowledge management for library and information profession. Rhodes University.

Shokeen, A., and Kaushik, S. 2002. Information seeking behaviour of social scientists of Haryana Universities. Library Herald 40(1): 28-35.

Singh, G. 2002. Use of college libraries by faculty members of university of Delhi.Library Herald 40(4): 263-270.

Soria, M., et.al.2013. Library use and undergraduate student outcomes: new evidence for students' retention and academic success.Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.Libraries and the Academy, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2013), pp. 147–164.

Wilson, T.D. 1999. Models in information behaviour research.Aslib: The Association for Information Management. The Journal of Documentation. Volume 5.
Yin 2003.Case study research: design and methods. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Yusuf, F. and Iwu, J. 2010.Use of academic library: a case study of Covenant University, Nigeria. Chinese Librarianship: an International Electronic Journal, 30.

A Quarterly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.
International Journal of Research in Social Sciences
http://www.ijmra.us

112