

Information Seeking Among Law Undergraduates at the University of Peradeniya: Identifying Barriers and Proposing Strategies

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Abstract


This study investigates the information barriers faced by final-year law students at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, aiming to assess both personal and external barriers and propose improvements to law-related resources and services. The study utilized the entire population of fourth-year law students, consisting of 50 students, and employed structured questionnaires, resulting in a 72% response rate. It identified personal barriers such as time constraints, limited familiarity with library resources, discomfort in using the OPAC and lack of information literacy skills. Additionally, there were external barriers such as the absence of current legal materials and digital resources in the library. The research underscores strategies to alleviate these barriers by providing more up-to-date legal materials, expanded electronic

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resources, increased computers and internet facilities, and information dissemination through mobile technologies, thereby fostering a more conducive environment for academic success. The study also suggests resource and service improvements as a response to the major personal barrier of time constraints faced by students.

Key words : Information barriers, Information access, User needs, Legal education, Legal information

Introduction

Library users face various barriers and hindrances when seeking information. In addition to the provision of information services and facilities, librarians should strive to identify and eliminate whatever barriers which prevent readers from accessing information. These barriers may emanate within or without the user and in the form of cognitive, physical, and immaterial obstacles. They may hinder, delay or prevent access to information and weaken quality information behavior.

The current study is an attempt to identify barriers faced by undergraduates when using an academic library for seeking information. The cohort was final year (4th year) law students at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka (UoP). The main goal of the study was to find out what difficulties these students face when looking for information and to suggest ways to overcome these problems.

The University of Peradeniya, is one of the leading and largest residential Universities in Sri Lanka. From 1950 to 1965 the University possessed a Law Faculty until the Faculty was transferred to the University of Colombo. After a very long standstill, the University of Peradeniya re-entered the legal education domain. The Department of Law was established in 2009 and offers a unique four-year LLB Degree which has an interdisciplinary approach towards legal education. The degree has a strong social justice orientation with a focus on the role of law in addressing social problems. In this context, the library is tasked with the mission to make this effort successful through the provision of needed resources and services.

Literature background of the study

Exploring the information-seeking behavior of law students is crucial for understanding the challenges they face in accessing and utilizing information resources effectively. This literature review critically examines several studies conducted in different countries, focusing on the experiences and barriers encountered by law students when searching for information in both print and electronic formats.

[Ossai's \(2011\)](#) case study of law students at the University of Benin in Nigeria highlighted difficulties in locating appropriate information sources and emphasized the role of libraries in addressing these challenges through effective information literacy programs. Additionally, it highlights the phenomenon of "library anxiety" among students, suggesting a need for supportive and user-friendly library environments.

[Ogba \(2013\)](#) shed light on the challenges faced by Nigerian law students, including limited internet resources, difficulties in identifying relevant materials, and a lack of knowledge regarding reliable sources. These findings underline the significance of addressing infrastructure deficiencies and enhancing information literacy skills among law students.

[Kadli and Hanchinal's](#) study carried out in 2015 in an Indian university highlighted the proficiency of law students in accessing legal databases but also identified challenges such as information overload and deficiencies in search skills in the online environment. This emphasizes the importance of structured training programs to optimize information utilization among students.

[Das and Jabab's](#) findings in 2017 in Bangladesh, reaffirms the predominance of online sources among law students but highlights concerns regarding the currency and availability of information. The study emphasizes the importance of addressing issues such as the lack of open-access sources and unfamiliarity with search strategies and, highlight the need for comprehensive strategies to improve access to up-to-date and reliable information resources.

The existing literature on the information-seeking behavior of law students in Sri Lanka indicates a noticeable gap in local studies addressing this aspect, which could hinder the identification of potential barriers within the process.

Information seeking behaviors of local law students were studied in a few occasions. [Wijetunge and Alahakoon \(2019\)](#) examined the information-seeking trends among law students entering two universities in Sri Lanka, advocating for well-planned support programs to aid students as they commence their undergraduate studies. [Gunasekera's](#) survey on students' usage of academic libraries in 2010 at the University of Peradeniya and, [Wijetunge and Manatunga's](#) study carried out in 2015 on law students at the University of Colombo offers some insights into library utilization but does not delve deeply into the specific needs and preferences of law students. Recent studies by [Fernando and Weerakoon \(2022a, 2022b\)](#) shed light on the information usage patterns among law undergraduates at the University of Peradeniya, with regard to purpose of seeking information, access frequency and, types of resources preferred by law students, emphasizing the importance of understanding students' preferences regarding electronic and printed resources for library collection development.

Only a very few studies address the issue on barriers to information seeking of law students. [Karunaratna \(2015\)](#) identifies barriers such as insufficient workstations, slow internet speed, and a lack of computer skills hindering access to e-resources, particularly at the Open University of Sri Lanka. [Dayananda and Jayawardhana \(2018\)](#) contributed to this discourse by exploring the information needs and behavior of law students at the Sri Lanka Law College, offering insights into the unique challenges faced by this group.

While existing studies offer valuable insights into the information-seeking behaviors and associated challenges of law students in Sri Lanka, it is crucial to note that the literature lacks a comprehensive examination of the barriers faced by students and the potential role of libraries in addressing these challenges. The current research is an attempt to address this gap with the aim of enhancing the overall information-seeking experience for law students.

In addressing barriers to information, library professionals must first identify and understand the diverse types and typologies of these barriers. [Swigon \(2011\)](#) proposed a universal typology consisting of four groups: (1) Barriers connected with personal characteristics, such as lack of awareness, skills, or time, as well as psychological resistance to technology or asking questions; (2) Interpersonal barriers, including a lack of assistance from individuals who serve as primary or secondary information sources; (3) Environmental barriers, encompassing legal, financial, geographical, political, and cultural factors; and (4) Barriers associated with information resources, which can be further categorized into obstacles within libraries (e.g., insufficient resources, unfriendly rules), those imposed by authors and publishers (e.g., information overload, language dominance), and challenges in utilizing the internet (e.g., technical issues, information overload). It's essential to recognize that information barriers often overlap and are

interconnected. For instance, library-related barriers may manifest across all groups rather than solely within the domain of information resources. This understanding underscores the complexity of addressing information barriers comprehensively.

Statement of problem and significance of the study

Reviewing of similar or related literature pertaining to this study has shown that law students face multiple barriers and challenges in information seeking which falls under the types discussed by [Swigon 2011](#). Failure to consider user needs and address barriers within the library may result in students feeling disconnected from library services. Therefore, it's important for libraries to pay special attention to resolving these issues to support students in their information-seeking efforts.

A knowledge gap regarding the barriers and challenges faced by law students does exist in the local context as discussed in the literature review section. Thus, the current study will be the first comprehensive study on assessing barriers to information seeking of law students in UoP. Despite the general perception that information provision and services are satisfactorily being made by the library to the 4th year law students, the inquiry will assist the library management to realize the degree of satisfaction of readers, the barriers they come across, their reactions, and strategies in face of these barriers and challenges. It will also provide useful information to make better decisions to improve law-related resources and services.

With the main aim of identifying the difficulties faced by final year law students in the University of Peradeniya, the study underpinned the following specific objectives.

1. To determine the information requirements and service requirements anticipated by 4th year law students in UoP,
2. To find out personal and external barriers faced by them when seeking information

Research Methods

This study focuses on 4th-year undergraduate of the Department of Law at the University of Peradeniya, in the year 2020. The entire batch consisted of 50 students. Since the number is small, the entire population was considered to ensure the highest level of accuracy. As the main library houses the law collection, the study focused on the use of the main library only. Data collection was primarily conducted using a structured questionnaire distributed online via "Google Forms". The questionnaire primarily focused on assessing the barriers while reserving a question to assess student's needs. The questionnaire was prepared based on the typologies of barriers as identified by Swigon (2011). Selected typologies were categorized under two main themes as personal barriers and external barriers. Data collection achieved a robust response rate of 72%, with 36 out of the 50 targeted respondents participating in the study. Data were analysed using Microsoft Office Excel 2007 and descriptive statistics were presented in graphical or tabulated form.

Results and Discussion

1. Information requirements and service requirements anticipated by law students

External barriers related to information seeking often involve challenges associated with accessing information resources. To gain a better understanding of these external barriers, which will be elaborated on later, the

study sought to identify students' anticipated information needs from the library. The majority of requests falls into the categories outlined in Table 1.

The findings revealed a strong need for current legal material (89%). Further, it suggest that students prefer more online resources such as databases for information needs (83.3%) , but there is also a growing trend towards using social media for information access (55.6%). This is an indication of the increasing importance of emerging technologies in their information engagement as extensively reviewed by [Limas \(2020\)](#) highlighting the changing information needs and behaviors of undergraduates in the contemporary society.

Other than the major findings, students expressed a need for automated, efficient, and flexible reader services (9, 6.3%), which encompassed improved customer-friendly service, better communication, and flexible rules. Some students also requested legal materials in the Sinhala language (2, 1.4%) and remote access to e-journal databases provided by the library (not shown in Table 1).

Table 1

Information Requirements and Service Requirements Anticipated by Law Students

User Requirements	Number of responses	%
Provision of more current legal materials	32	88.9%

Provision of electronic resources and online legal databases	30	83.3%
More computers with high-speed internet facilities	23	63.9%
Provision of government publications	23	63.9%.
Provision of academic and other information through mobile technology (WhatsApp, Viber, Instagram, etc.)	20	55.6%

Academic libraries have long been essential to the academic success of undergraduates. However, with the influence of emerging technologies and other socio-cultural factors, libraries must adapt to remain relevant. While many libraries have made strides in updating their physical and virtual spaces and expanding online databases, there remains a need for a deeper understanding of undergraduates' everyday information needs and behaviors.

2. Personal barriers to information seeking

Table 2 shows in a descending order the personal barriers identified by respondents. The primary barrier identified is the lack of time (75%), which is a significant hindrance to regular library visits. This aligns with the findings by [Fernando \(2021\)](#) study on information seeking of law students at the Peradeniya University main library which reveals that 47% visited the library only when an information need arise, some visited once a week (19%), others several times a month (14%) or occasionally (11%). Only 6% visit the library

on a daily basis indicating that the busy schedules of students may not allow for habitual library use.

Overall, the other personal barriers faced by students were recorded in low percentages (<50%), which indicates the relatively minor impact they may have in comparison to the primary barrier identified. However, it is crucial to consider the other responses as well, as ‘even seemingly minor’ barriers can collectively contribute to a student's overall educational experience and success.

A proportion of 36% of participants reports that they are not comfortable in using the library online catalogue / OPAC. This is disappointing since the online catalogue is one of the easiest ways to find library resources in printed format.

Table 2

Personal Barriers to Information Seeking

Personal factors	Number of responses	%
Lack of time to seek information and use the library	27	75.0%
Not comfortable in using the library online catalogue / OPAC	13	36.1%
Lack of information searching skills and strategies	11	30.6%
Lack of knowledge on available law resources in the library and elsewhere	8	22.2%

Lack of knowledge on how to begin a search in the library	7	19.4%
Not confident enough to select information most appropriate to information need	6	16.7%
Lack of language skills	2	5.6%
Special needs student (differently able student)	2	5.6%
Not sure how to evaluate information sources.	1	2.8%

Furthermore, the findings reveal that a noteworthy proportion of students (22%), lack knowledge about available law resources in the library indicating that they may not be fully aware of the broader range of resources available in the library.

According to [Fernando and Weerakoon \(2022a\)](#), the UoP library houses a rich collection of law related information sources under 6 major collections (general, reference, Ceylon room and three special collections) which are recognized as either ‘very important’ or ‘important’ by law students. However, 8.4% of the students were completely unaware of two special collections in the library. The availability and location of the library resources in all collections can be easily retrieved from the OPAC. Hence, students require training to use the OPAC without feeling anxious.

Information literacy (IL) is an essential skill for undergraduates. The findings indicate that a relatively small number of students believe they lack certain important IL skills. For instance, 30% of students reported a lack of information searching skills and strategies, 19.4% expressed a lack of knowledge on how to initiate research in the library, and 16.7% indicated a

lack of confidence in selecting the most appropriate information for their needs.

According to the findings it can be assumed that approximately 70% of the students are knowledgeable or at least believe they are competent in information searching. As [Karas and Green \(2008\)](#) observed, undergraduates often exhibit overconfidence in their ability to locate information and assess its credibility. This observation was further supported by [Kim et al. in 2014](#), who noted that while the availability of digital resources has expanded undergraduates' access to information, they still lack some fundamental information literacy skills.

It was reported that 19% of students lack knowledge on how to initiate library research. Nevertheless, students have the option to seek assistance from the library's academic staff for research-related matters. It's intriguing to examine whether students actually reach out to the staff and, if not, why they refrain from doing so. This is a topic worthy of further exploration. However, as indicated in Table 3, a mere 2.8% of students expressed dissatisfaction with the support provided by library staff. Various reasons may contribute to students' reluctance to seek help. As [McAfee \(2018\)](#) noted, library anxiety can cause users to feel alienated and disconnected from library culture and staff.

Accuracy and relevance of information is a must in the legal profession, therefore law students who are learning to be professional need to ensure the information, they gather is accurate and reliable. Given that 16% of students lack the skill to select the correct material and 2.8% lack information evaluation skills, the library can contribute to enhancing their information evaluation skills through user education programs.

Only 5% have reported language barriers, but it's important to focus on improving the language skills of students who need assistance. Similarly,

despite the small number of differently-abled students (5%) in line with UNESCO SDGs, the library should investigate the needs of these students as well.

[Martzoukou et al. \(2022\)](#) highlights that barriers to information seeking by law students may encompass disparities in digital competences, such as differing levels of proficiency in utilizing digital tools and media for academic purposes. Furthermore, it emphasizes that digital citizenship mindsets, including attitudes and behaviors related to information literacy and digital wellbeing, can significantly impact students' ability to effectively seek and utilize information in their legal studies. The current study also suggests that personal barriers identified, may closely intertwined with the specific information-seeking habits and preferences of law students. Therefore, alleviating these barriers should be done through tailored support and guidance to enhance their library usage and information-seeking skills.

3. External barriers to information seeking

External barriers or challenges encountered when seeking information especially within the library environment were considered in the study. Table 3 shows the list of barriers revealed by student responses.

Accordingly, a majority of the respondents (80%) mentioned that lack of adequate law related information as the major challenge. The inadequacy of material is further aggravated by the fact that available materials are not current (66%).

The findings from Table 1 of the current study indicate that 83.3% of students are eagerly anticipating the availability of electronic resources and online legal databases. This finding is further supported by the discovery that

50% of the population perceives the absence of a digital library containing legal material as a challenge.

Availability of law journals were accepted as adequate by a majority. However, 66% have identified that latest journals are not available. Journals are very important resources for a profession-oriented education. Especially the importance of journals to law students was shown the study by [Fenando and Weerakoon's \(2022b\)](#) study which reported the preference for e- journals as very high (91.7%). The same study revealed a high usage of electronic information resources by law students of UoP, with e-books, local law websites, E-case summaries, foreign law websites, and E- judgments and E- newspapers were preferred by a majority (>60%) while academic databases were the least used (50.0%).

Table 3

External Barriers to Information Seeking

External factors	Number	
	of responses	%
Lack of adequate law related information resources (print/online)	29	80.6%
Available law related materials are not current	24	66.7%
Inadequate law related reference tools (Encyclopedia, dictionaries, bibliographies etc.) and reference books	6	16.7%
Absence of electronic / digital library containing legal related materials	18	50.0%

Inadequate number of law journals (print/online)	17	47.2%
Non-availability of <u>latest</u> law related journals (print/online)	24	66.7%
Lack of adequate computers for students' use and lower bandwidth /internet speed	14	38.9%
Law related materials are not in the right places or not well arranged	9	25.0%
Infrastructure (Seating facilities, fans, ventilation, lighting,) is not sufficient	9	25.0%
Library opening hours and circulation hours are not flexible	5	13.9%
Library staff are not supportive	1	2.8%
The library does not offer enough information skills training sessions	3	8.3%

However, earlier studies carried out at UoP reveled different results. For example [Gunasekara \(2010\)](#) states that 78% of the respondents were unaware of the electronic journal services provided by the UoP main Library. Further, [Premarathne \(2017\)](#) state that only 36% Final year Arts undergraduates use electronic resources. The changes in preferences as indicated in the current study shows the growing tendency of the contemporary undergraduates to use online resources.

Respondents also have mentioned that lack of computers for students' use and lower bandwidth /internet speed (39%) as a barrier. This too is a common barrier in the Sri Lankan university libraries. According to

[Karunarthna \(2014\)](#) , the main barrier for 52% of the students for seeking e-resources on Law was insufficient workstations with adequate bandwidth.

4. Proposed strategies to overcome the barriers

Based on the outcomes of the study, the problems perceived by a majority of students are considered as notable barriers thus strategies to alleviate them were formulated.

Insufficient law-related information resources, whether in print or online and outdatedness of available material present a barrier. To address this, it is suggested to acquire relevant and up-to-date information resources to enhance the collection while maintaining a balance between the two formats. In doing so it is important to liaise with students and faculty.

To address the issue of non- availability of latest law journals, the library could explore the possibility of acquiring specialized law-related e-journal databases and other resource databases such as LexisNexis, Westlaw, Legalpedia, Law Journal Online, Compulaw, Hein Online, Law Pavilion, and Find Law within the allocated budget.

The absence of an electronic or digital library containing legal-related materials poses a barrier. To overcome this, it is recommended to establish a digital library or load the institutional repository with sufficient local law-related materials. This can be achieved by purchasing e-books, e-case summaries, e-judgments, and other law-related e-resources.

To cater to the smaller proportion of users lacking information literacy skills, it is advisable to train staff members in the reader services division to comprehend various user behaviors associated with library anxiety and related factors. This training should equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively assist and support such students.

To address the main personal barrier reported by students, which is the lack of time to use the library due to busy study schedules and other commitments, the library can implement several strategies.

Firstly, offering extended library hours, especially during peak study periods, can provide students with more flexibility to access resources. Additionally, providing remote online access to library resources and databases allows students to utilize materials remotely, saving time on commuting to the physical library.

Introducing mobile library services or book delivery options can further accommodate students' busy schedules by allowing them to request materials and have them delivered to their preferred location on campus. However, it will be challenging to initiate this service with limited staff, financial matters and by-laws in the university system.

Furthermore, promoting time management and study skills workshops can help students better organize their schedules and make the most of their available time for library use. Overall, a combination of these strategies can help alleviate the time constraints faced by students and encourage greater utilization of library resources despite their busy schedules.

Conclusions

The findings from this study shed light on the major and minor barriers faced by law undergraduates in their information-seeking journey, both internal (personal) and external. The main internal barrier reported by students is the time constraints. In addition, lack of familiarity with library resources, discomfort in using the OPAC and deficiency in information searching skills, were identified as minor barriers. External barriers are inadequacies in the part of the library. The major was related to information resources particularly due

to the inadequacy of current and up-to-date resources in the library. The absence of modern law-related journals and a digital library with legal materials further compounds the challenge.

In light of these findings, strategies were proposed to address these barriers to information seeking. These include enhancing information resources by acquiring up-to-date materials in both print and online formats, providing specialized law-related databases, and establishing a digital library or loading the institutional repository with local law-related materials. Staff training on user behaviors and library anxiety can assist students lacking information literacy skills. Extending library hours, providing remote access to resources, and introducing mobile library services or book delivery options can accommodate students' busy schedules. Additionally, promoting time management and study skills workshops can help students better organize their schedules for library use. Moreover, recognizing the students' preference for mobile technology and social media as communication channels could enhance information dissemination to the students. Implementing these strategies can alleviate barriers and encourage greater utilization of library resources among students

Recommendations

Strategies proposed by the study which are discussed in the text can be applied as recommendations

Further studies

The survey can be extended to all study levels of the Law undergraduate degree programme at UoP to identify barriers at each level. This extension would offer a comprehensive understanding of the evolving challenges students face throughout their academic journey,

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