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Volume 14, numéro 2, 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102272ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.18438/ebliip29569>

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Éditeur(s)

University of Alberta Library

ISSN

1715-720X (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Jabbar, A. (2019). Why are They Not Visiting the Library? Understanding Political Science Postgraduate Students. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 14(2), 106–108. <https://doi.org/10.18438/ebliip29569>

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Using Evidence in Practice

Why are They Not Visiting the Library? Understanding Political Science Postgraduate Students

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Received: 16 Mar. 2019

Accepted: 7 May 2019

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DOI: [10.18438/eblip29569](https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29569)

Setting

The Department of Political Science is one of the oldest departments of University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. The University of the Punjab is one of the oldest and renowned public sector universities of the subcontinent. Currently, the Department is offering three graduate and four post-graduate programs in Political Science, International Relations, Diplomacy and Strategic Studies, and a post-graduate diploma program in International Affairs.

The departmental Library supports the curricular needs and promotes research culture among the students and faculty members of the Department. The Library also serves as an archive for the research heritage

of the Department. One librarian with an MPhil Degree in Library and Information Science serves in the Library, alongside two clerks and two library attendants.

Problem

The librarian joined the Library almost three years ago.

The work assigned to undergraduate students was usually done through the help of available books in the library. However, the graduate students who had chosen thesis in their second year were visiting library and the librarian with research-related queries, that is, database selection, query formulation, advanced searching techniques and help

related to references management and formatting style.

However, the librarian was curious about the needs of the post-graduate students who were conducting MPhil and PhD level research, but were neither visiting the library or consulting the librarian frequently. Some post-graduate students visited the Library once or twice a month for required books without consulting the librarian for any research-related help or queries. The librarian wanted to understand why postgraduate students were not visiting the library frequently.

Evidence

It was therefore considered appropriate for the librarian to conduct in-depth, face-to-face interviews with the students. In mid-December 2015, a total of 25 post-graduate students who had completed their coursework and were carrying out their theses or research work were invited for interview through email and telephone. Interviews were conducted with 15 students, including 8 female and 7 male, from 4 post-graduate programs after acquiring their prior consent for participation. The students were asked to discuss the reasons why they were not consulting the librarian for help with research-related issues. The interviews were conducted by the librarian and notes were taken during interview. The data were analyzed by employing thematic analysis. A number of reasons were identified through thematic analysis.

Unawareness and Misconceptions regarding the Librarian's Professional Skills

The students (n=9) had never considered that the librarian would be able to resolve research problems, because they were unfamiliar with the job role of the librarian. Some (n=4) said that they had never met the librarian, or felt the need to meet them. The students felt that the support staff conducted the core work of the Library, while the librarian's role was to control them.

Multiple Previous Bad Experiences

Some participants did not expect that any librarian could help them, or that any librarian would offer to help. Hence, they did not consider the librarian as a source of help for research assignments or theses.

Assignments and Theses did not Require Exploration

The most interesting inferred reason was that most students claimed they were working on a thesis topic that was descriptive, meaning they thought that they did not require any primary sources like research articles or reports. Instead, they focused on books related to the topic, as well as some websites and newspapers.

Unawareness of Relevant Databases offered by Higher Education Commission

The majority of the students mentioned that they were only familiar with Google, Google Scholar, and JSTOR as sources to consult for assignments and research work. They had not heard of other relevant databases available through the HEC Digital Library, such as Emerald, Science Direct (Elsevier), and SpringerLink.

Misconceptions Regarding use of Journal Articles

The post-graduate students considered that the nature of the field (Political Science and International Relations) did not require the incorporation of journal articles. Instead, they wrongly thought that secondary sources like books were the most appropriate.

Lack of Scholarship and Interpretation in Research Projects and Theses

Through interviewing, it had found that postgraduate students had chosen those topics of their theses that based on descriptive research rather analytical research. They were dividing their dissertations into five or six

chapters mainly focused on fulfilling the minimum requirement of words count for a dissertation.

Implementation

After data collection, the results were discussed with the post-graduate program coordinator. A number of steps were taken to address the issues identified. A series of seminars were arranged with the help of the course coordinator, covering topics such as avoiding plagiarism, reference management styles and software, advanced searching techniques, and how to do literature review. Through these seminars, the students were encouraged to visit the librarian with research-related queries.

With the help of the Main Library at the University of the Punjab, a hands-on practice session was arranged on the HEC Digital Library and on Zotero Reference Management Software. Program teachers were also requested to assign topics which required extensive use of published and unpublished literature.

Outcome

The post-graduate students contacted the librarian through email and telephone with research-related queries. These queries were mostly related to checking similarity through 'Turnitin' as a way to avoid plagiarism, the formatting of theses according to the Doctoral Program Coordination Committee (DPCC), and for guidance on reference management. The frequency of visits to the Library, as well as to the Librarian increased. This data was recorded through logging issues, returns, and the number of post-graduate students' visits to the librarian. The information literacy services offered by the librarian positively affected the students' perceptions; they now considered the librarian to be instrumental in their research assignments and theses.

Reflection

Although data collection was limited by the fact that it was very difficult to convince the students to participate in the study, the results were very encouraging and positive. Tangible as well as moral support from faculty members and program coordinator was appreciable. Future plans include expanding the study to undergraduate students.