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Santharooban, S, "Research Support Service Model of Academic Library: Case Study at Eastern University, Sri Lanka" (2022). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 7018.

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Research support service model of academic library: A case study at Eastern University, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Academic libraries have an innovative service called ‘Research Support Service’ to support institutional research. Under the research support service, the worldwide academic libraries provide a range of services. The library of Eastern University, Sri Lanka provides research support services since 2014. This paper investigates the research support service model of the library of Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL). This investigation analysed the documents such as official correspondence, pamphlets, library home page and students' feedback. The research support service of EUSL library focused more on training the undergraduates in research related aspects by organising a series of sessions on students' requests. As an extension of the research support service, the library also has introduced the individual research consultation service, where the researchers as an individual or group meets the library professionals to get personal assistance on research. The feedback analysis showed that the undergraduates highly appreciated the service on its usefulness.

Moreover, the service was commended by programme review of the university grants commission of Sri Lanka. There are challenges to implementing this service, such as lack of skills and capacity among library professionals, lack of human resources and physical facilities, the conventional mindset of library professionals and lack of proper marketing of library services. However, this was a successful service, and increased the recognition of the library and library professionals among students and faculty. In turn, library professionals were invited to higher-level committees to contribute to the institutional research.

Keywords: Research, Research support service, Individual research consultation (IRC), Role of academic librarians, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

There is an important question posed by Parker (2012) “If the merit of universities is judged almost solely on research performance, what can academic libraries do to support their universities, and how are we addressing these new requirements?” The question itself says that libraries should change focus towards the research. As an academic entity in the higher education system, the library should support the research process immensely. The library can support the research when it moves beyond the horizon of its conventional services (Stamatoplos, 2009). Academic libraries traditionally support the research through collection development, information searching and providing necessary information (Auckland, 2012). However, this support is not very useful as the information is readily available to everyone in

their fingertips in digital format due to technological development. Due to this advancement in technology, the libraries function are viewed as less valuable (Dempsey & Malpas, 2018). Therefore the academic libraries should re-design their service models in which the librarians should play an important role in the learning and research process. To achieve this, the libraries should expand their service beyond the traditional horizon to support every step in a research life cycle.

In this regard, academic libraries in the world have developed a new service called 'Research Support Service' that primarily support the research process of the parent institution. The research support service is defined as "anything that a library does that supports the activity of scholarship and research at its parent institution" (Hoffman, 2016, p. xiv), while Larsen (2010) states that "a primary researcher support service is a service offered to academics at the university in order to support their role as researchers." In the line of this evolution, the library of Eastern University, Sri Lanka, also initiated a research support service dedicated purely to the training. As such, this paper aimed to analyse the research support service model of the Library of Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

2. Literature review

This section analyses the various models of research support services in academic libraries worldwide. Many research support service includes digital services. One of the digital services is the institutional repository (Borrego & Anglada, 2018; S. Brown et al., 2018; Keller, 2015; Larsen et al., 2010). This service is considered as most important service (Borrego & Anglada, 2018) and is used to preserve and disseminate institutional-based research, especially undergraduate works (Hensley et al., 2014).

Another digital service in research support service is bibliometric analysis (Borrego & Anglada, 2018; Keller, 2015; Larsen et al., 2010; Raju et al., 2016) which is considered as an expert level research support service (S. Brown et al., 2018). This support service assists the researchers in better decision making on the journal to publish. In addition to the bibliometric, the libraries also support the researchers on other research metrics such as h-index, Journal Impact Factor and Journal Citation Reports (Raju et al., 2016).

Another digital service is research data management (RDM) (Borrego & Anglada, 2018; R. A. Brown et al., 2015; S. Brown et al., 2018; Hoodless & Pinfield, 2018; Keller, 2015; Larsen et al., 2010; McRostie, 2016; Raju et al., 2016). A large amount of research data in different formats like numbers, text, images, sounds, or videos generated by research, are managed and digitally preserved in academic libraries in foreign countries since certain foreign countries have mandated that the researchers should deposit the data of government-funded research in the repository (Si et al., 2015). The well-managed research data will help verify the results and make them available to the broader research community to re-use in the future.

Other digital services include digital scholarship, digitisation and digital curation (S. Brown et al., 2018). Digital scholarship includes data analysis (both quantitative and qualitative data),

data visualisation, Geographic information systems (GIS) software, media creation & editing, 3D modelling, data mining (S. Brown et al., 2018; Thomas, 2011).

Apart from the digital services, research support services include training and supporting scholarly publishing services. Many academic libraries provide training services to researchers as a part of the research support services. The training has a range of topics such as open access, intellectual property, remote access to electronic resources (Borrego & Anglada, 2018), data management (Si et al., 2015), information retrieval (R. A. Brown et al., 2015), use of Web 2.0 technologies, research-oriented tools, bibliometric, referencing, and research assessment (Larsen et al., 2010). Another research support service is supporting researchers on scholarly publishing, which includes mainly the consultation on publishing venue, open access and promotion of publication and digital publication (S. Brown et al., 2018).

The following diagram illustrates the significant services under the research support service of an academic library (Fig 1).



Figure 1: Summary of Research Support Service in academic libraries (Santharooban & Ravikumar, 2022)

3. Methodology

The author used the insider researcher (Kanuha, 2000) approach in this study. The study used the descriptive method to achieve the objective and analysed the official correspondence, pamphlets, library home page and students' feedback as the primary data sources. The thematic analysis was used to analyse the students' feedback.

4.1. History of research support service at Eastern University, Sri Lanka

Being an academic entity in higher education institutions, the library needs to support the research carried out by the institution. The library of Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL) had a long-felt need to support undergraduate research. As such, the Library of EUSL has launched a new service – 'Research Support Service' (RSS) with the motto of "Library's & Librarians' role in the success of research and academic publication" in the reading month of 2014 (Ravikumar, Santharooban & Ramanan, 2014). This service aims to enhance the research quality and output of EUSL by supporting the undergraduate research and the research carried out by academic staff. Even though the research support service is one of the advanced services in academic libraries worldwide, the EUSL is the pioneer in Sri Lanka in this service. After the initiation, the research support service is being implemented at the Faculty of Health-Care Sciences of EUSL successfully, with a lot of improvements and new dimensions, which will be discussed in the forthcoming sections. The service was started at this faculty as an on-demand service, where the library users can register individually or as a group for this service, and the library provides for those who have registered. The service was advertised at the faculty board and by service banners at the library. Initially, students approached the librarian at the faculty and got the service. This service gained the attention of the departments through the students' feedback. After that, the departments responsible for conducting the undergraduate research programme approached the library for this service, and every year, departments request this service once they have completed their research methodology module.

YOUR RESEARCH! OUR RESPONSIBILITY!!

NEW SERVICE

Workshop for Undergraduates

The Outreach Team of EUSL Library is embarking on a new **Research Support Service [RSS]** to its users. This service includes series of workshop and seminars for the undergraduates, especially for the **final year students** who are engaged in research and publications.

Workshop Content

- **Effective use of e-Resources & Internet for literature search & review**
Resource person: **M. N. Ravikumar**, Senior Assistant Librarian/EUSL
Sub topics;
 - Introduction to electronic databases available at EUSL
 - Open Access resources in the web
 - Information Searching techniques
 - Use of Search engines to find information
 - Effective literature search on the internet
 - Evaluation of web resources
 - Digital library services
- **Research writing & Referencing styles**
Resource person: **T. Ramanan**, Senior Assistant Librarian/EUSL
Sub topics;
 - Intellectual property rights
 - Copyright, fair-use & plagiarism
 - Citation techniques & referencing styles
 - Structuring your thesis / dissertation
 - Presenting your work
- **Using 'EndNote' reference management system to manage citations**
Resource person: **S. Santharooban**, Assistant Librarian / FHCS, EUSL
Sub topics;
 - Introduction to EndNote
 - Create EndNote library
 - Adding new reference
 - Edit preferences and output styles
 - Use EndNote to cite while write
 - Import reference from Databases
 - Search reference and find full text resource
- **Use of Ms-Office applications for thesis work**
Sub topics;
 - Basic Statistical tools in Excel,
 - Presenting the statistical outputs in text
 - Scientific way of presenting graphs and figures
 - Use of Track changes for correcting documents
 - Creating table of contents, list of figures and list of tables and indexes
 - Techniques for PowerPoint presentation

Are You a Final Year Student? Engaged in Research??

This is 4 U

Sessions medium: English / Tamil
Date: 28th October, 2014
Time: 9.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. (Includes Lunch & Refreshment)
Venue: CICT Lab

REGISTER NOW !!

30 nos. of participants will be accommodated in first come first serve basis. Register & confirm your seat before **17th October, 2014**. For further information contact **M. N. Ravikumar**, Senior Assistant Librarian (Workshop - Coordinator), EUSL

Library's & Librarians' role in the success of research and academic publications

Figure 2: First flyer for the initiation of Research Support Service

4.2. Service Model

This service includes a series of workshops on various research topics with hands-on practice. Initially, this service had the following four topics;

- Effective use of e-resources and internet for literature search and review,

- Research writings and reference styles,
- EndNote reference management system to manage citations
- Use of MS-Office Applications for thesis work

When this service was introduced at the Faculty of Health-Care Sciences, the programme content was revised based on the request of students and departments. The faculty has two programmes that are MBBS and B.Sc nursing. Both programmes have mainly community-based research components in their curricula. Therefore, the content of the service was modified gradually to support such research. Presently the following content (Table 1) has been included in the service. The students or departments have the freedom to choose the topics they need or go for the complete package.

Table 1: Topics covered by Research Support Service

Topics	Hours Needed
1. Writing Research Proposal	2
2. Effective Online Searching: Strategies in online search engines Open Access Databases Databases provided by UGC Digital theses and dissertation search	3
3. Medline (PubMed) Search	3
4. Writing Literature Review	2
5. NVivo for literature review and qualitative data analysis	2
6. Designing and validating Questionnaire	2
7. Avoiding plagiarism and Referencing styles	2
8. Mendeley/EndNote Reference Management Software	3
9. Basic Data analysis using SPSS/R	6
10. Structuring dissertation Include advanced techniques in MS-Word/Excel	1
11. Presentation techniques	1

4.3. Virtual Mode of Research Support Service

Since its inception, the face to face session was conducted mainly at the computer laboratory and for a few topics at the Lecture hall. Since the undergraduates are going for clinical clerkships in the morning and lecturers in the evening, it was challenging to find a suitable time slot for face to face training. As an alternative, a hybrid session was formulated through a virtual learning environment (VLE) using Moodle. The dashboards were created research support service in the VLE of faculty, and the students who requested the service were enrolled. However, the software demonstration was conducted face to face at the laboratory.

The use of a virtual learning environment for the research support service gave some advantages. The library can share the soft copy of handouts and reduce printing costs. Moreover, the students of this generation mostly prefer softcopy than hardcopy to access

through their devices. Another advantage is that the VLE enables the library to check the improvement of participants on a particular topic through pre and post-test methods and to get anonymous feedback. The VLE also helped the trainer to give individual feedback to the participants. To train the students in writing the literature review, they were given selected research articles on specific health-related topics and requested to write a literature review and submit the document through VLE. The trainer then read every paper and gave individual feedback.

After the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic, the research support service took a new dimension using the ZOOM video conferencing application as an entirely virtual service, where both the ZOOM application and Moodle VLE were used in a hybrid way. Even though there are certain limitations when using video conferencing applications, the research support service was conducted successfully without any hindrance of the pandemic.

4.4. Students' Feedback

At the end of the workshop series, feedback was obtained from the participants. The received feedback was analysed, and they were categorised as following themes:

1. Usefulness of session
2. The teaching style of trainers and programme arrangement
3. Drawbacks of the sessions
4. Suggestion for future programme

4.4.1. Usefulness of session

Many participants compared their previous experience and knowledge before and after the research support service session. The undergraduate who participated in these sessions had already completed their research methodology module, taught by the academic department. Even though this module gave theoretical background about research, the undergraduate needs some practical approach to learn and initiate their research process, and this research support service gave an opportunity to plan their study.

“Even though we have a separate module for research and statistics, we could get a very little amount of knowledge because we didn't have any chance to practice them. This is a very good opportunity to learn how to start a research and do it.”

Many participants reported that their initial knowledge was not sufficient to start their research, and they were not even confident to start and even had fear about their research. However, after this session, they gained confidence by gaining practical knowledge on research-related aspects.

“...earlier I don't know how to write a research proposal and had fear about how to do the research.”

“... Though we have the theoretical knowledge, we were not confident to carry out our research. After completing this workshop, we gained more knowledge about using the

internet effectively in our thesis. Now I feel it is very easy for research review and references. ...”

“I had a lack of idea about doing the research before this research support service. Now I have some ideas to do research.”

“When we come to the workshop, we don’t know how to prepare a proposal, how to find more articles from the web. But we have an idea about that.”

“Because earlier we were struggling with writing proposal and preparing the questionnaire and searching articles. But now I hope that I got confident for work with my research work.”

Moreover, this session was a place to clear their doubts about the research process and the facilities available.

“.....At the same time, we could clarify most of the doubt regarding our research.”

“.....we cleared our doubt regarding research. We got more information regarding proposal and resources.”

The participants also reported the subject content that they gained from the session.

“This service improved my research literature reviewing and how to find out the research article from the internet, and also I got knowledge about Mendeley web.”

“This is the first time I understand the research proposal writing.”

“And also now only we know that we have lots of facilities for our researches.”

“It’s very useful for us, and we gained more knowledge about research steps, and especially we got more knowledge on e-resources.”

4.4.2. The teaching style of trainers and programme arrangement

The participants appreciated the teaching or presentation style of trainers and programme arrangements.

“Really well-planned session has been taught by the librarians. They didn’t confuse us or lift up any overloads.

“Your presentation style is overall good. You covered more benefit information about research within a short period.

“This workshop was very useful for our research. Lecturing methods is very clear and good, especially help for searching research articles.”

“Lecturer method was good. We understand all the parts of the lessons. Gave the more explanation and help....”

4.4.3. Drawbacks and suggestions for future programme

Participants also indicated only one drawback in the session, i.e. speed of the session.

“.....but something I couldn't understand because of the speed.”

“.....But in the last session, I felt it was little bit fast other sessions, I understand.”

“.....But if they teach slowly, it's good for us, because some points we didn't catch.”

The participants also suggested organising more sessions on the research related topics, and many pointed to organising this session for their juniors.

“.. When we are doing research, we may face problems. So then after we need help from you.

“If you can conduct more classes for us. It will help is and will be more important.

“Want more days/arrange at least two weeks. “

“And also please conduct the remaining session and continue this service for our juniors also.”

“Please conduct this programme in future also.”

“ and I kindly request if you can continue this session for our juniors' batches also.”

4.4.4. Evolution of Individual Research Consultation (IRC) service

After introducing the research support service, the undergraduates realised the capacity and need of librarians for their research and started to visit the librarian to get individual assistance for their research. It leads to the evolution of the Individual Research Consultation (IRC) service. As an extension of the Research Support Service, the library started this new service, and the service was officially announced at the Faculty Board. This service mainly targets the undergraduate researchers of the faculty. During their research project, the undergraduate can meet the library professionals as individuals or groups to get research-related advice. Since the faculty has group research projects, students prefer to meet the library professionals as a research group. Students get advice and assistance from librarians, especially for literature searching, literature reviewing, using reference/troubleshooting reference managers, questionnaire designing and data analysis. The students' feedback after every consultation is maintained in a separate record. The faculty undergraduates highly appreciated this service, according to the feedback. In an interview, Ivan Portillo, the Health Science Librarian of Chapman University, reported that the university has a similar service, where the researcher meets the Subject Liaison Librarian for IRC (Portillo, 2019).

4.4.5. Recognition to Librarians

Even though the Librarians are parallel to university academic staff, due recognition to the library professionals are comparatively low. Traditionally librarians' interaction with the student community is much less, and they are viewed as a person who merely builds and organise the collection. This has resulted in poor recognition to Librarians. The librarians have to interact with students academically to market their capacities and earn recognition. It was evident after the successful implementation of the research support service at Eastern University, Sri Lanka. The students frequently approached the librarians to get assistance for their research work. It made the research supervisor and academic department recognise the librarians' role in supporting the research process. When the students identify the librarians, academic departments also recognise the librarians. The faculty invited the librarians to the research-related committees such as ethics review committees and research committees. In turn, the librarians contributed at the policy level at these committees and served as resource persons for several training programmes. Moreover, the research support service delivered by the library was commended by the programme review conducted by University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka.

Moreover, the faculty also approached the librarians for collaborative research. All these were possible because of the research support service initiated by librarians. Being a faculty librarian, one can get more chances for interaction with faculty and students.

4.4.6. Challenges faced

There are challenges in implementing research support services in the library.

1. The conventional mindset of librarians

Traditionally, the library professionals had rare opportunities to interact with the students except for the orientation programme in the first year. Their primary focus is on collection development, organisation and administrative task. When the concept of research support service was formulated, there was a question and hesitancy among library professionals that this is the role of the academic department, and they anticipated that there would not be demand among undergraduates for this kind of service. Once the service was successfully implemented and when the continuous request came from students and academic departments, the library professionals realised that it was an essential service in the library.

2. Lack of enough librarians to handle the students' request

When there are several faculties that the library should cater to, the library needs enough library professionals to deliver the service to all the faculties. However, this will not be an issue at a faculty library.

3. Lack of skills and capacities among Library professionals to be subject liaison librarian

The prime challenge is the lack of knowledge and skills of library professionals on the research related aspects (Borrego & Anglada, 2018). The success of the research support programme depends on the expertise of library professionals to be on par with the research

trend of the university. It is a very challenging aspect. The library professional should develop the necessary skills with in-depth knowledge on the research life cycle, apart from their postgraduate qualification in library and information science. The library should pay attention to the capacity building of library professionals. The library professional should be up to date on the current trends and technology.

4. *Building trust in the capacity of librarians among the user community and faculty*

The traditional view on the library professionals among the university user community is the knowledge managers. Their expertise in research support is not customarily showcased. Therefore, it is still challenging to build trust among the user community on library professionals' capacity on assisting the research process. Continuous involvement in these services will definitely build trust.

5. *Lack of physical facilities*

The physical facility is essential to support these services, especially the library should be equipped with IT lab with enough computers with good internet connectivity and all the necessary software. Moreover, the library should have a separate section dedicated to research support services, and the university library should also assign separate library professionals to be a focal point for this kind of service.

6. *Lack of proper marketing of the library service*

The lack of awareness for library services is a common problem everywhere. The user communities, especially students, are unaware of the library services (Daly, 2011). Many libraries organise the orientation programme when the students come as freshers. At that time, the students are in a transitional state for a new environment, and they might gather a few portions of the message that the library deliver. Moreover, the students need this research support service in their later stage of the academic programme, and there are more chances for the students to forget this service. Therefore, the library should find suitable marketing strategies like social media pages and other student gatherings. It is also better if the librarian arranges a regular meet up with students' associations.

5. Conclusion

The academic libraries are expected to contribute to the research process of the institution. Apart from building the collection to support the institutional research, the libraries should incorporate training as their service. The research support service is one such opportunity to train the researchers on research related aspects. Under the umbrella term of research support service, the worldwide academic libraries provide many services such as institutional repository, bibliometric, research data management, support for scholarly publishing, digitisation and digital curation and training. Among these services, the library of Eastern University, Sri Lanka, focused on providing training on research related aspects, especially to undergraduates during their research projects. The service was highly appreciated by the undergraduates and faculty academic staff and was commended by programme review

conducted by UGC, Sri Lanka. This service builds trust in library professionals' capacity among the users' community and increases recognition for them. As such, library professionals was invited to the policy-making committee, where library professionals contributed to the research process of the institution. Even though the services was a success story of the library, there are challenges in implementing the service such as conventional mindset of library professionals, lack of skills and capacity among librarians, lack of human resources and physical facilities and lack of proper marketing of library services. However, these challenges can be overcome with continuous effort, and this service will be considered a new service paradigm of academic libraries in higher education institutions.

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