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## **An international student as a library user – a short review**

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International students in academic libraries are a subject that has generated some interest in library science. As a part of my TACE coursework, I studied a few of the more recent articles (last ten years or so) on the subject. In this article, adapted from my coursework, I try to present some of the main points from these studies.

Libraries survey international students, both to find out problem areas in their information literacy skills and to find out what kind of services international students are hoping to receive from libraries. A good example of this type of survey is the one conducted by Pamela Jackson in the San Jose State University (Jackson, 2005).

Jackson found out that international students are used to modern information technology and are reasonably computer savvy. This means that if international students have trouble using library services to their full extent, the cause of this is something else than simple lack of technological skills. Jackson found out that certain Western library concepts, such as interlibrary loan and librarian reference-by-appointment, were new to the international students answering the survey. This could be solved with better communication by the library. In fact, the surveyed students themselves ask for more extensive introduction and orientation to the library services and policies.

Three librarians conducting a study at Californian academic libraries found out that despite the best intentions, libraries in the **USA** are rarely able to provide extensive dedicated services for international students (Knight, Hight, & Polfer, 2010). To do this, they reviewed the web-pages of twenty American academic libraries and sent two questionnaires to librarians through listservs.

Very few of the surveyed libraries had dedicated librarians for international students.

Knight et al. found out that libraries typically provide glossaries for library terminology and occasionally also the translations of the terminology into other languages. Some of the library web-pages also provide links to materials in languages beside English. Only a few had a separate instructional material for international students, so different skill levels in English are not really taken into consideration. Separate instructional material could also make the international students more aware of the differences with the library services in their own countries. Very few of the surveyed libraries had dedicated librarians for international students. This is likely to mean that the outreach to international students is not very coordinated, and instead is dependent on the interest of lone librarians. (Knight, Hight, & Polfer, 2010)

International students don't utilize library services as much as they could.

Knight et al. also put out a questionnaire for international students and interviewed some students personally or in focus groups. They found out that international students do use the library premises for study purposes, but don't utilize the other library services as much as they could. When the international students search for information, they tend to start with their friends, teachers or with the information they can find freely on the Internet. The students interviewed felt they needed more information about the different services available. Some of the interviewees also acknowledged that assignments involving searching for information independently are rare in their home countries. This means it is unlikely they have experience of utilizing all the resources available in a modern academic library.

The librarians strengthened and opened up new contacts outside the library.

As an answer to the need pointed out by their research, Knight, Hight and Polfer have tried to develop services for international students in their own libraries. All three started to design a dedicated web page for international students, and will pay attention to issues such as international information resources and plagiarism. The librarians also strengthened and opened up new contacts outside the library, including international student services and English as a second language -educators. The purpose of these outreach programs is to make the library a part of the international students' study life as early as possible. They believe that this will raise the international students' level of achievement and retention, and suggest that this rise can be later measured. (Knight et al., 2010)

Differences in how libraries work and differences in study styles.

Two of the articles replaced the typical survey with an in-depth interview with students. Hilary Hughes interviewed international students in two **Australian** universities. Most of the students whose experiences Hughes reports come from Asian countries, such as India, China and Malaysia. She found out that many of these students have problems arising from differences between how libraries work in Australia and the students' countries of origin (Hughes, 2010).

A **Canadian** study on international students' experiences and views came up with similar results. The nine Chinese graduate students interviewed at the University of Alberta identified language barriers, differences in how libraries work and differences in study styles as major attributors to the fact that international students do not utilize the library services as much as they could. (Morrissey & Given, 2006)

The students often had not even considered getting help from the librarians for complex questions.

Both studies found out that for many of the interviewed students, the library had merely been a place where you could receive the needed course books at the start of a semester. Even open stacks were new to some students, as in their previous universities they had to order all books from the librarians. The students often had not even considered getting help from the librarians for complex questions. Those who had requested help from librarians were generally very impressed both by the librarians' knowledge and their willingness to help the students. Besides being unfamiliar with the concept of a reference librarian, Morrissey and Given also identified the fear of being impolite as a reason not to approach librarians for help.

The students had very little experience of searching for information on their own as an academic task.

Differences in educational methods between countries can be seen as another factor influencing the relationship between the international students and academic libraries (Hughes, 2010; Morrissey & Given, 2006). For many of the students, education in their home country had been very traditional, teacher- and lecture-centered and assessed by exams. This lack of research-based exercises meant that the students had very little experience of searching for information on their own as an academic task. Both Hughes and Morrissey & Given noted the great reverence many of the interviewed students gave to the advice they get from their teachers. This leads the students to prefer sources given to them by their teachers over the ones they have searched for themselves.

International students should be offered chances to more informal learning.

In both of the studies library orientations currently available were considered too brief to give the students clear understanding about the role of the library (Hughes, 2010; Morrissey & Given, 2006). Morrissey and Given identified language anxiety as an issue that affects the students' interactions with the library and the librarians, both in the orientation and beyond (Morrissey & Given, 2006). Hughes suggested that besides more formal training, such as instructional sessions or courses, international students should be offered chances to more informal learning. This includes arranging chances for the students to meet the librarians in more informal settings during the orientation and of course making it clear to the students that they can always contact the library's services if they need. (Hughes, 2010)

Information searching has an important role in any academic work.

Morrissey and Given fear that the international students' lack of information literacy skills can lead to problems in their studies. Firstly, information searching has an important role in any academic work. If the students don't know about the resources available in the library and how to use them, they might end up using lower quality sources from the Internet. Secondly, the students might get into trouble with plagiarism, if they do not understand the concept and consequences of getting caught plagiarizing. Thirdly, Morrissey and Given mention a possibility of legal trouble following from the misuse of copyrighted material. (Morrissey & Given, 2006)

The issue of international students as users of academic libraries has also been a subject of research in **China**. Both Shao and Scherlen (2011) and Nzivo and Chuanfu (2013) see this as a result of not only the rising number of international students in Chinese universities, but also as a result of the growing influence of Western library science in China.

Shao and Scherlen did a small review of the services available to international students in China by surveying the administrators of three academic libraries. They also surveyed librarians to get their views on the subject. China is different to the USA, Australia and Canada in the fact that many of the international students interact with librarians in a language which is not native to either speaker, English.

Tailoring education for international students and training librarians in language and intercultural skills.

Shao and Scherlen found out that not all the librarians in Chinese academic libraries yet have the necessary skill in English to interact with international students. Only one of the surveyed libraries had an English language website and the libraries had very few education programs in English. The library administrators were aware of this and acknowledged that the services to international students need to be developed. The librarians Shao and Scherlen surveyed also seemed to agree that services to international students are important and need developing. They rated enhancing collections in different languages over other types of services, but tailoring education for international students and training librarians in language and intercultural skills were also seen as important. (Shao & Scherlen, 2011)

Nzivo and Chuanfu surveyed international students attending Wuhan University. It should be noted that 91 percent of the students came from other Asian countries or Africa. This means that most of the students surveyed are probably from countries where library services are not as developed as in China. It might also mean that the students are more easily satisfied with the library, because their level of expectation is lower. Interestingly, most of the students reported their skills in Chinese to be at least fair. The majority of the respondents also attended programmes that were taught in Chinese. This is rather different to the situation here in Finland, where the majority of the international students study in English. It also makes the lack of English services in libraries noted by Shao and Scherlen more understandable. If the students are expected to be able to study in Chinese, they are probably also expected to be able to use the library using the Chinese language. On the other hand, over half of the students responding to the survey said that English is their preferred language in searching for research materials, and as the language of these materials.

As was the case in the American surveys, the students again rated their teachers, classmates and friends as a more important source of information than the libraries. The major problems mentioned by the students were again the language barrier and inadequate education for using the library. Improving user education for international students was therefore suggested by Nzivo and Chuanfu as one of the ways to better the library services. This is especially important for students from countries where library services are not as developed. Nzivo and Chuanfu also suggest naming dedicated librarians who have the necessary language skills to interact with international students. (Nzivo & Chuanfu, 2013)

While surveys are a typical method of research in library science, other methods have been used to study the library experience of an international student. Curry and Copeman tested the communication skills of reference librarians using the field stimulation method (Curry & Copeman, 2005). They sent an international student, with some difficulty conversing in English, to ask for help from reference librarians, and record her observations about the interactions. Being approachable, friendly and polite went a long way in making the student feel satisfied about interacting with the librarian. Curry and Copeman noted that it is of utmost importance to make the student feel at least satisfied enough with the interaction to consider contacting a librarian another time. Being friendly and respectful seemed to also be important because it went together with the librarian giving the test student the time she needed to explain her needs. Taking the time with a customer is of course even more important if there are communication difficulties due to a language barrier.

Explaining the library jargon used is important in all situation.

Many of the communication techniques Curry and Copeman were looking for are as important when the librarian is interacting with students who have the same native language,

as they are when interacting with international students. These include things like probing the customer with questions to find out their needs and instructing the student with the aim of increasing their skills. This can be done for example by the librarian explaining their actions while performing them. Explaining the library jargon used is important in all situation, but perhaps even more so when interacting with international students. One thing Curry and Copeman would have preferred to see more of was the technique of rephrasing the student's questions, to make sure there were no misunderstandings about the students' needs.

Curry and Copeman also raised some points specifically related to cross-cultural communication. They mention that the librarians need to ask the students simple questions and give them time to answer, as in many cultures the rules of polite conversation do not allow the student to interrupt the person in position of authority, in this case the librarian. The librarian should also initiate the interaction with a friendly greeting as the student is approaching the service point, to make clear to the student that they are allowed to ask for assistance from the librarian. (Curry & Copeman, 2005)

All of the studies above stress the point that many international students share the same problems when interacting with academic libraries. Language difficulties come up both when interacting with library staff and when trying to get to know the library. Additionally, language anxiety can make it hard to contact librarians for help. Differences in cultural communication styles also play a part. Librarians can be seen as a person in higher position of authority who cannot be freely conversed with. The differences in library culture and services between countries might cause the biggest problems. An international student might ignore the services a library can provide merely because they are not aware of them.

A better tailored and more extensive tutoring.

Many of the articles support similar actions as a solution for these problems. A better tailored and more extensive tutoring is seen as key for getting the students acquainted with the library. When creating webpages and study materials intended for international students, cultural issues should be taken to account. Teaching more cross-cultural communication skills for librarians is also seen as important.

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