

Safahieh, H., & Singh, D. (2006). Information needs of international students at a Malaysian University. In C. Khoo, D. Singh & A.S. Chaudhry (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Asia-Pacific Conference on Library & Information Education & Practice 2006 (A-LIEP 2006), Singapore, 3-6 April 2006* (pp. 479-485). Singapore: School of Communication & Information, Nanyang Technological University.

## INFORMATION NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY

HAJAR SAFAHIEH & DILJIT SINGH

*Department of Information Science  
Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology  
University of Malaya 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
E-mail: [hsafahieh@yahoo.com](mailto:hsafahieh@yahoo.com), [diljit@um.edu.my](mailto:diljit@um.edu.my)*

**Abstract.** The number of students studying away from their home countries is increasing. These students face various challenges when studying abroad, including meeting their information needs. This study investigated the information needs of international students at the University of Malaya. A questionnaire was designed and distributed to 70 students, of whom 54 (77.1%) responded. It was found the main information needs were related to the university, the faculty, and their programs of study. The students used the library in attempting to meet their information needs, although the frequency of library usage was generally low. The main barriers in seeking information were language related, and unfamiliarity with the library organization and mission. Language proficiency appeared to be a barrier in being able to meet the information needs. Although the majority of the students considered themselves to be computer and Internet literate, but that did not have a relationship on the problems they faced in meeting the information needs.

### Introduction

The desire to pursue higher education is constantly increasing. School leavers recognize that higher educational qualifications result in more job options, lower rates of unemployment, and, in most cases, a higher salary than those with a secondary school qualification only. Not only are school leavers entering colleges and universities, but working and mature adults are also entering or returning to higher education. These adults hope to use the higher educational qualification to play a more ambitious role in their organization or society, to fulfill a personal desire to acquire new knowledge and abilities, or respond to a need to develop intellectually.

The need for quality higher education often takes students to out of their home countries. Due to limited places in institutions at home, many students pursue their studies abroad. Students also study abroad to acquire a more global perspective, to develop international attitudes, make their resumes more attractive, or to further develop their language proficiency. Students also benefit through learning about new customs, holidays, foods, art, music, and politics firsthand. They may also study abroad to advance their studies in specialized areas not available at home. In many developing countries, a foreign degree, especially if earned from certain countries, is considered more prestigious than a local one.

These students, studying in a country other than their country of origin, are generally referred to as 'international students' or 'foreign students'. The terms 'international students' or 'foreign students' are used interchangeably in this paper.

Malaysia is one country that attracts international students for higher education. The Malaysian Government and the institutions of higher learning are striving to attract international students, especially at the graduate level. The institutions make every effort to provide quality education. A wide range of courses are offered. Living costs are generally kept low. English has been made the medium of instruction for science and technology courses. These factors have resulted in Malaysia becoming an attractive destination for international students from various parts of the world. At the end of 2005, it was estimated that there were about 40,000 foreign students studying in Malaysian public and private higher educational institutes (Clark and Sedgwick, 2005).

The University of Malaya is one of the 17 public universities in Malaysia, and the oldest of them. Established in 1959, the university endeavors to attract international students. Among the goals of the university are to increase the percentage of international students to 30% of the postgraduate student population by 2006 (Institute of Postgraduate Studies, 2006). To meet this goal, the university provides appropriate academic, recreational, cultural, counseling and informational support for this group of international students, through its Institute of Postgraduate Studies.

While efforts are made to make these international students welcome and adapt to the new environment, it cannot be denied that these students face problems. Earlier studies have indicated that the problems include adapting to the new educational and social environment, pressures of staying away from home, financial pressures, language problem, and lack of friends (Australasian Law Teachers' Association, 1995). Other studies that have examined the problems of international students, grouped them into 11 categories: financial aid, placement services, English language, academic records, health services, socio-personal, admissions and selection, living/dining services, orientation services, student activities, and religious services (Michigan International Student Problem Inventory, cited in Galloway and Jenkins, 2005).

Among the problems faced by this culturally heterogeneous group of students are those related to information provision and library services. These international students come from a wide diversity of cultures and have different experiences with libraries in their home countries. Many of them are unfamiliar with the open stacks in libraries, the classification system, and reference materials (Liu, 1993) and some of them have no prior experience with electronic resources in their home countries (Yoo Seong 2004).

Yet information is an important resource to these international students for educational and personal success. Given the critical importance of information in today's world, these students need information for various purposes, and libraries can play an important role in meeting of their information needs through their programs, facilities, and services. But, in order to accomplish this task effectively, libraries must first understand the information needs of this group of students.

It needs to be acknowledged that while international students come from diverse backgrounds and cultures, and may be very different in demographic and educational characteristics, they are sufficiently different from the locals to be treated as a separate entity. Libraries, and university administrators, could benefit from an understanding of the information needs of this category of students.

This study was carried out to examine the information needs and the barriers in meeting these needs among international students enrolled at the University of Malaya.

### **Brief Review of Literature**

Interest in studying library services to meet the information needs of international students has developed over the last decade, partly due to the increase in numbers of students attending colleges and universities in foreign countries. Studying in a foreign country is challenging for many students, because their cultural-educational background may be different from the local students and university staff (Volet, 1999). These international students need information for a variety of purposes in their studies, including preparing course assignments and project papers (Abdoulay, 2002), but in some cases, the library usage may differ from their home library due to different cultural backgrounds (Curry and Copeman, 2005). Wilson (1997) noted that information needs are influenced by cultural background, characteristics such as emotional, educational, demographic, social or interpersonal, environmental, and economic intervening variables; and by social context in which the need arises.

Mackenzie (1995), who surveyed the library and information needs of the international students in the Kent State University, found that the greatest number of international students were in the 26-30 years age group, predominantly male, studied in a graduate program, and attended school full time. In her study, many respondents (78.8%) expressed the need for more multicultural materials in the library, such as current native language books, journals, magazines, and newspapers. Many respondents also indicated that they needed useful library instruction because of a general lack of familiarity with online catalogues and other library automation.

Jackson (2005) conducted a study to determine the library needs of incoming international students in the United States. A total of 121 respondents, representing 38 countries were surveyed at San Jose State University. The results showed there was a need for providing more information resources in other languages, especially daily newspapers from student's home country, interest in local [San Jose] area information, and job related information.

Barron and Strout-Dapaz (2001), in their study on communicating with and empowering international students with a library skill set, suggested that collection development must recognize the information needs of international students, and library collections should contain materials such as foreign language dictionaries, literature in foreign languages, TOFEL preparation materials, and foreign-language newspapers and magazines.

Beside information needs, international students generally share common problems and barrier in using libraries. Many researchers have indicated that international students face challenges in utilizing their academic libraries (Ariyapala and Edzan, 2002; Baron and Strout-Dapa, 2001; Liu, 1993; On-

wuegbuzie and Jiao, 1997). The barriers and difficulties faced by international students may arise from unfamiliarity with the mission and organization academic libraries, a lack of skills with the various information technologies, reluctance to approach reference stations and professional librarians due to language differences, lack of information literacy, in particular the inability to seek, obtain, and evaluate information (Wang and Frank, 2002).

Kumar and Suresh (2000) in their study pointed out the barriers that international students encounter are due to their perceptions of the role of the reference librarian. Students felt that they may trouble the librarian with their questions. The researchers found that another barrier was communication, due to inability of library staff to understand the students and also the students' inability to clearly express their information needs because of lack of fluency in the language, vocabulary limitations, or a hesitation in using the language because of a lack of confidence.

There is relatively little research literature in Malaysia concerning foreign groups' information needs. Mohamed (2000) carried out a survey on the information need of foreign women in Malaysia, with special reference to Sudanese community. The findings of her study showed that the main information needs of respondents were related to continuing their education, education of their children, parenting, concerns about their family health, child-care, tackling youth problems and other every day concerns. Other findings of this study revealed that main barriers of foreign woman in meeting their information needs were limitations in Bahasa Melayu and the English language.

As the numbers of international students continues to grow at universities, libraries need to look at new ways of responding to the needs of these students (Howzea and Mooreb 2003).

The literature thus suggests that international students have information needs that are somewhat different from the locals, and that they do face barriers in meeting these needs. This prompted a study to examine the information needs and barriers in meeting these needs among international students at the University of Malaya.

## **Methodology**

The survey research method was used to carry out this study. A three-page questionnaire, consisting of open and closed-ended questions was designed, pilot tested, refined, and used for data collection.

The first part of the questionnaire comprised items concerning demographic information of gender, area of study, discipline and country of origin. The second part comprised 13 questions on their main information needs, English language proficiency, level of computer and Internet skills, frequency of library use, and barriers in meeting the information needs.

The questionnaire distributed among 70 international students enrolled at the University of Malaya in January 2006. Fifty-four respondents completed and returned the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 77.1%.

## **Findings**

### ***Demographics of Respondents***

Of the 54 respondents, 32 (59.3%) were male, and 22 (40.7%) were female. As to the country of origin, the respondents came from 23 different countries. In terms of age, 38 (70.4%) were between ages 26 and 35 years. In terms of level of study, 48 (88.9%) were enrolled in Masters programs, followed by 5 (9.3%) in the doctoral program. In terms of faculty of study, 25 (42.6%) were from Computer Science and Information Technology, 8 (14.8%) from Arts and Social Science, 7 (13.0%) Education, 7 (13.0%) from Economics and Administration, 3 (5.6%) from Science, 2 (3.7) from Engineering, 2 (3.7%) from Medicine, 1 (1.9) from Law, and 1 (1.9) from Languages and Linguistics.

Thus the international students in this study were quite evenly distributed in terms of gender, were primarily between the ages of 26 and 35, enrolled in a Masters program, and mainly from the science and technology based faculties.

### ***Information Needs***

The respondents were requested to indicate five main information needs, in order of priority. The findings are summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Category of Information Needs of Respondents**

Category of Information Need	Frequency	Percentage
Information about university and faculties	18	33.3
Information related to their program of study	15	27.8
Information related to the their courses	10	18.5
Information related to continuing education after their graduation	9	16.7
Local information about Malaysia	8	14.8

It can be seen that the main information needs were related to the university / faculty and their program of study.

The respondents were also asked about the role of the library in meeting their information needs. As can be seen from Table 2, a large majority of the respondents (47 or 87%) considered main university library as the first place for their information needs, while digital / electronic libraries were ranked first choice by only 4 (or 7.4%). This is in line with Wang and Frank's (2002) findings, who noted while electronic information service are used increasingly by many students, international students may be reluctant to use these services.

**Table 2. Type of Libraries Used by Respondents for Meeting the Information Needs**

Type of Library	Frequency	Percentage
Main university library	47	87
Digital library	4	7.4
Public library	2	3.7
College / Hostel library	1	1.8

Thus students use the university library for their information needs.

The respondents were further asked how often they visited the library to meet their information needs. As seen in Table 3, 21 (38.8%) used library almost daily, but a surprisingly large number (16 or 29.6%) used the library several times a semester only.

**Table 3. Frequency of library visits**

Frequency of Visit	Number	Percentage
Almost daily	21	38.8
Once or twice a week	9	16.6
Once or twice a month	8	14.8
Several times a semester	16	29.6

This suggests that while they consider the university library as the primary choice, but the usage is rather infrequent.

### **Barriers to Information Needs**

Respondents were asked to state whether they faced any barriers in meeting their information needs. It was found that majority of students 30 (70.4%) had faced barriers.

Those who had faced barriers were asked the nature of the barriers, in order of priority. A total of 22 respondents (40.7%) indicated the language was their main information barrier, 11 (20.4%) indicated unfamiliarity with the library organization and mission of academic library, 8 (14.8%) indicated inability to seek, obtain and evaluate information, 5 (9.3%) were hesitant to approach the reference station and professional librarians.

**Table 4. Information Barriers of Respondents**

Type of Barrier	Frequency	Percentage
Language barrier	22	40.7
Unfamiliarity with the library organization and mission of academic library	11	20.4
Inability to seek, obtain and evaluate information	8	14.8
Hesitant to approach reference station and professional librarians	5	9.3
Inadequate knowledge about library system	4	7.4

This suggests that language inadequacy is the primary barrier in meeting their information needs.

#### **English Language, Computer and Internet proficiency**

The respondents were asked to provide a self-assessment on their level of English language, computer and Internet proficiency. The analysis showed that 11 (20.4%) of the respondents assessed their English language level as “limited”, 28 (51.9%) as “good”, 12 (22.2%) as “very good” and only 3 (5.6%) respondents indicated as “excellent”.

**Table 5. English Language Level of Respondents (n=54)**

Proficiency Level	Frequency	Percentage
Limited	11	20.4
Good	28	51.9
Very good	12	22.2
Excellent	3	5.6

A cross tabulation found that 54.5% of respondents with limited English language had faced barriers in meeting the information needs, whereas only 20% of respondents with excellent language proficiency had been faced information barrier.

This suggests that proficiency in language is a factor in meeting their information needs.

The respondent also asked to provide a self-assessment on their level of computer proficiency. Of the 54 respondents, only 4 (7.4%) perceived their computer proficiency as “limited”, 29 (53.7%) as “good”, 9 (16.7%) as “very good” and 12 (22.2%) as excellent.

**Table 6. Computer Proficiency of Respondents (n=54)**

Proficiency Level	Frequency	Percentage
Limited	4	7.4
Good	29	53.7
Very good	9	16.7
Excellent	12	22.2

Thus most of the respondents indicated that they had good computer skills. This is not surprising since many of them were from the science and technology-based faculties.

The respondent also asked to provide a self-assessment on their level of Internet proficiency. The results showed that of the 54 respondent, only 2 (3.7%) perceived their computer proficiency as “limited”, while 23 (42.6%) considered themselves as “good”, 13 (24.1%) as “very good” and 16 (29.6%) as excellent.

**Table 7. Internet Proficiency of Respondents (N=54)**

Proficiency Level	Frequency	Percentage
Limited	2	3.7
Good	23	42.6
Very good	13	24.1
Excellent	16	29.6

Again, most of the respondents indicated good Internet skills, which is not surprising considering the majority were from the computing faculty.

A cross tabulation of the level of computer and internet proficiency appeared to have no relationship with the barriers which they faced in meeting the information needs.

## Conclusions

Looking at the information needs of international students at University of Malaya, it was found the main needs were university, faculty or course related information. This suggests a present focus on their needs.

A vast majority of the students did use the library in meeting their information needs. However, their library usage was not very frequent. In attempting to meet their needs, the main barriers faced were the lack of proficiency in English, and unfamiliarity with the library. Language proficiency was found to be a barrier in being able to meet the information needs. The majority of the students considered themselves to be computer and Internet literate, but that did not appear to have a relationship on the problems they faced in meeting the information needs.

While the findings of this study are not necessarily definitive due to the small sample and single location, it is nevertheless hoped that university libraries and university administrators will take note of the findings, and strive towards meeting the information needs of international students. The outcome of meeting the information needs of international students can be mutually beneficial to both the institutions and to the students.

## References

- Abdoulay, K. (2002). Information seeking behavior of African students in Malaysia: a research study. *Information Development*, Vol.18, no. 3. 191-195
- Ariyapala, P. G. and Edzan, N. N. (2002). Foreign postgraduate students and the online catalogue at the university of Malaya library. *Malaysian Journal of library & Information Science*, Vol.7,no. 1, 57-67.
- Australasian Law Teachers' Association. (1995). Problems Faced by International Students in Their Courses in a Regional University: What is the Solution? Available at <http://beta.austlii.edu.au/au/special/alta/alta95/verma.html>
- Baron, S and Strout-Dapaz, A. (2001) Communicating with and Empowering International Students with a Library Skills Set. *Reference Services Review* Vol. 24, no. 4. 314-26.
- Clark, Nick and Robert Sedgwick. (2005). International students: It's a Buyers Market. *World Education News and Reviews*. August 2005, 18(4). Available at [www.wes.org/eWENR/05july/feature.htm](http://www.wes.org/eWENR/05july/feature.htm)
- Curry A. and Copeman D. (2005). Reference Service to International Students: A Field Stimulation Research Study. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 31, no. 5. 409-420.
- Fu, Ah Kiow. (2004). 50,000 Foreign Students Expected in Malaysia Next Year Malaysian national news agency. [http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v3/news\\_list.php?cat=ge](http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v3/news_list.php?cat=ge).
- Galloway, Fred J. and John R Jenkins. (2005). The Adjustment Problems Faced by International Students in the United States: A Comparison of International Students and Administrative Perceptions at Two Private, Religiously Affiliated Universities. *NASPA Journal* Vol. 42 (2): 175-187.
- Howzea, P.C. and D. M. Mooreb. (2003). Measuring international students' understanding of concepts related to the use of library-based technology. *Research Strategies*, Vol. 19. 57-74.
- Institute of Postgraduate Studies, University of Malaya. (2006). Objectives. Available at <http://ips.um.edu.my/>
- Jackson, P. A. (2005). Incoming international students and the library: a survey. *Reference Service Review*, vol. 33(2). 197-209.
- Kumar. S.L. and Suresh R. (2000). Strategies for providing effective reference service to international adult learners. *The Reference Librarian*, No.69/ 70. 327-336
- Liu, Z. (1993). Difficulties and Characteristics of Students from Developing Countries in Using American Libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, Vol.5, no.1. 25-31.
- Liu, M and Redfern ,B.(1997). Information seeking behavior of multicultural students: A case study at San Jose State University. *Collage & Research libraries*. 348-354.
- Mackenzie, Darlene E. (1995).survey of library and information needs of the international students and Kent State University. Master's research paper, Kent State University. ERIC#: ED309410
- Mohamed, Samia. (2000). Information needs of foreign women in Malaysia, with special reference to Sudanese community. Masters dissertation. University of Malaya.
- Onwuegbuzie A. J. and Jiao,Q. G. (1997).Academic Library Usage: A Comparison of Native and Non-native English-speaking Students," *Australian Library Journal*, Vol. 4, no. 3. 258-69.
- Sarkodie-Mensah, K. (1992). Dealing with international students in multicultural era. *The Journal of Academic librarianship*, Vol.18 (September), 214-216.
- Volet, S. (1999). Learning across cultures: appropriateness of knowledge transfer;chapter6. *International journal of education research*, Vol. 31. 625-643.

- Wang, J. and Frank, D.G. (2002). Cross-cultural communication: implications for effective information services in academic libraries. *Libraries and the Academy*, Vol. 2, no. 2. 207-216.
- Wilson, T. D. (1997). Information behavior: an inter-disciplinary perspective. *Information Processing and Management*, Vol. 33, no.4. 551- 572.
- Yoo-Seong, S. (2004). International business students: a study on their use of electronic library services. *Reference Services Review*, Vol. 32, no. 4. 367-373.