

# User Education Programme in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester: A Case Study

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## Abstract

The paper reports a case study which was conducted during the doctoral research by the author. It aimed to find out the relevance of user education programme in academic libraries to the teaching and learning process. Data for the study was collected through the questionnaires, interviews with the library user-education specialists, other library staff, students and faculty. The multi-disciplinary approach was applied to investigate the library's activities in providing user education to new students. It emerged from the findings that for students to become truly information literate, the best way is to integrate the user education programmes into the university's core curriculum.

*Keywords:* User education; Information literacy; University libraries;

## Introduction

Changes in technology, society and educational systems are having a considerable impact on libraries and their instruction programmes. These changes require information literacy programmes for users to become more effective, efficient and independent in their information searching. The goals of library user education have expanded from teaching tools to teaching concepts and from library instruction to information literacy and life-long learning. This case study about the user education programme offered by the John Rylands University Library of

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Manchester (JRULM) attempts to find out its relevance with the users' academic achievements and learning process. Case study technique was used to get the "accurate data, understood outside the scholarly research community" (Winegardner, 2001). Yin (1994) defines case study in terms of the research process as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

### **Defining User Education**

User education, bibliographic instruction, library instruction, library orientation, reader instruction, information literacy are all terms which are used in the field of librarianship to describe educating library users in the independent use of library resources effectively and efficiently. Several experts, authors and library professionals have created different definitional structures for the concept of user education or bibliographic instruction. Salony (1995) considers it as follows:

The systematic nature of the efforts to teach something - a set of principles or search strategies relating to the library, its collections or services - using pre-determined methods in order to accomplish a pre-defined set of objectives (p.32).

### **Need of User Education**

The literature (Koenig, 2003; Nicholas, 2003) demonstrates that many students in higher education institutions need this help because the courses are becoming interdisciplinary and their pattern is changing. It makes imperative for students to become better library literate so that they can make the optimum use of the available sources of information. Fleming (1990) defined user education as "...various programmes of instruction, education and exploration provided by libraries to users to enable them to make more effective, efficient and independent use of information sources, resources and services to which these libraries provide access." He emphasized the need for

comprehensive programmes that aim to teach the concepts, skills and techniques of searching.

Orientation sessions, handouts, workshops, and course related and course integrated instruction are the activities aimed to achieve the goals of user education. The term 'bibliographic instruction' has more recently broadened to include the concept of information literacy. Library user education supports the concept of educating for a lifetime (life-long learning). The Think Tank II report on bibliographic instruction (Tiefel, 1995, p. 326) defined 'information literacy' as encompassing the entire world of information and seeking to prepare people to pursue the concept of lifelong learning. Information literacy extends its objectives to teaching information-seeking skills to all ages and at all times.

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

This case study was conducted during the doctoral research by the present author. One-day study visit was fixed with the library 'user-educator' to obtain the detailed information regarding the user education system of the JRULM. The multi-method approach was used for collecting the data (questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used in the study together with interview and discussion with the experts, library staff, library members) using two different instruments (quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interview techniques) with three of these sample types. The observation, opinions, perceptions and comments by students, faculty and library science specialists concerned with higher education libraries provided a great deal of information. The literature related to the information regarding user education programme in the above stated library, the library's policy documents, information leaflets, handbooks and guide maps available in the library were consulted. The JRULM Website (<http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk>) was found useful for supplementing the information on this study.

This library is the one used by the writer as the principal library in this research. Some of the information was therefore

gathered in advance during the normal course of using the library. A half-day appointment was fixed with Mrs. Sheila C.R. Padden to conduct interview and discussion session. She was both the specialist Faculty Librarian for Education and the JRULM Training Officer and was actively involved nationally and locally with projects for the enhancement of library education as well as internationally with two projects in Africa. The researcher prepared a series of starting points for discussion and the interview was tape-recorded for later analysis. The planned scheme was very flexible to let the speaker express freely to obtain interesting information and details.

### **John Rylands University Library of Manchester (JRULM)**

Manchester University's origin goes back in 1851 in the foundation of Owens College, created by a bequest from the local textile magnate, John Owens. Its library initially relied heavily on endowments. In 1903, the Owens College became the Victoria University of Manchester.

#### **Introduction**

The JRULM is the largest, non-legal-deposit academic library in the United Kingdom and supports all subjects in the University. It offers its members with a variety of services and resources - including the most extensive range of electronic resources. The JRULM also provides a range of services to the members of the public, schools and commercial companies.

The JRULM is using the best information systems available to offer an all-embracing range of services and resources: physical, virtual, current resources as well as ancient manuscripts in "the neo-gothic splendour." The JRULM is member of a number of international and national consortia. Internationally, it is a member of the Research Libraries Group (RLG). It is also a very active member of the Consortium of University Research Libraries (CURL). JRULM also participates in a number of national initiatives, including delivery of the *ISI Web of Science* (JRULM, 2001).

## Collection and users

The University library includes the principal working collections for teaching and research in every branch of human knowledge: e.g. humanities, education, law, medicine, science and social sciences. The JRULM (2000) gives up-to-date information showing the extensive use of the library. The library serves 11,000 users a day, and at peak times over 1000 users an hour. One can understand the busyness of the library by this. Table 1 demonstrates the status of collection.

Table 1. Resources Information on the JRULM (Year 1999-2000)

	Stock year 2000	Additions from 1999
Printed books including volumes of bound periodicals	3767 252	49029
Printed periodical titles	8918	68
Microforms	352 599	10742
Audio-visual (audio and video cassettes, slides, films, records, photographs, floppy discs)	37558	169
Electronic journals	2900	*
Manuscripts and archival items	1306 704	108641

\* Data not recorded prior to 2000

Source: <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk>

## Membership and access in the main and departmental libraries

Membership covers a wide variety of users. The main categories are as follows:

- a) All students of the University of Manchester, after initial registration, obtain a University of Manchester swipe card carrying their student details, photograph, bar code and magnetic stripe. This card also functions as a Library membership card.
- b) Staff members of the University of Manchester are (normally) entitled to a staff swipe card similar to those of the students.
- c) Alumni, private individuals and companies that are interested can take advantage of the various other categories of membership available. For example, a librarian elsewhere might wish to have access for career development; a school teacher participating in the training of teachers with the university might wish to have access for curriculum development purposes.

### **Data Analysis**

The library offers a wide variety of user education facilities to make use of its vast collection. The purpose of the library instruction programme is to acquaint the users with the mechanisms of searching, analysing and utilising the resources held in the library in all forms. In the JRULM a full user education programme is organised besides student's access to the reference desk for help and individual consultation at any time. Moreover, there are a number of help points within the main library building. Students take advantage of the instruction programmes arranged for accomplishing their desired results. The user-education specialists emphasised the fact that the defined priority for the library, particularly in the first part of each academic year, is user education, and this will normally have importance over all other library activities in organising the work schedules of the staff.

The responses from the questionnaires and interview showed that at the beginning of the academic year, the Library endeavours to give all new students a brief introduction to the array of services available to enable them make a confident and

intelligent start on their study programmes. Induction programmes are organised each by a subject specialist or a user education librarian in consultation with the academic staff. The user education programme is arranged on a departmental or faculty basis. Attendance in the programme is compulsory and listed in the students' timetable.

The data indicated that the library aims to foster information skills among students. The respondents stated that in this age of information explosion, when libraries are becoming increasingly sophisticated, these skills are needed to exploit their resources. By having recognised this fact, the JRULM set up a first PC cluster in 1983 for students' practical training in the use of databases, catalogues and bibliographic management packages. The use of computers in the JRULM has since been greatly extended (presently in excess of 250 work stations). The subject specialists and other library staffs are thus keen to arrange workshops for library users, tailored to the requirements of their degree programme.

### **Rationale and objectives of user education**

Data collected through employees questionnaire discover that students, even if knowledgeable and skilled in using their high school libraries, are intimidated by the massive size of the university library system, and the arrangement of its extensive print, non-print and electronic information resources. Therefore, students' frustration and anxiety needs to be reduced by making the information finding and retrieval process easier. The task of the User Education Programme at the library is accomplished by:

- 1) Assessing instruction needs of users.
- 2) Introducing new types of instruction programmes to meet the individual needs of specific group of users.
- 3) Promoting the awareness about the benefits of information literacy and importance of user education activities to support users' educational, research, and other information needs.

- 4) Co-ordinating, monitoring and continuously improving instruction activities and materials helpful in meeting the users' instructional needs.
- 5) Advertising and promoting user education activities among users.
- 6) Assessing and revising the instructional format, content, use of materials and handouts, class attendance, and schedule of user education programme and maintaining instructional materials for currency, accuracy and format.
- 7) Maintaining an adequate supply of printed handouts, instructional materials and supplies for use in user education activities.
- 8) Reviewing and compiling results of evaluations for user education activities for the purpose of evaluation of goals and objectives.

### **Orientation programmes**

For all students, library orientation programmes are offered in the library. Although these introductory sessions are designed for new students, the user education staff welcomes all interested in learning about libraries and their usage. For the orientation, two days of scheduled electronic demonstrations and library tours are held in the library the week before classes begin. The library also conducts orientation sessions specifically for international students. Students are given information leaflets and receive a demonstration of the library's web site and a tour of the library.

A two-hour programme is designed to provide new graduate students with the chance to meet their subject librarians, other library staff and other graduate students. Students are given a tour of the library, an introduction to the library's services and resources and information packs.

## **International students' orientation**

An orientation to the library is given to the overseas students, in cooperation with the Office of International Students, at the beginning of their course. Its aim is to reduce their anxiety and make them confident and effective users of the library. It was pointed out by the interviewees that some overseas students face particular problems due to their background, previous library experiences, training and culture. For example, it was mentioned that overseas students frequently show shyness, a cultural uncommunicativeness and unwillingness to admit lack of knowledge and unfamiliarity with the advanced computerised systems used in the library. For some students, being taught by a member of the opposite sex is a new experience requiring a difficult cultural adaptation.

## **Size of class**

In the JRULM, for classes with up to 25 students, sessions are held in the Electronic Reading Room, which allows students to learn in a hands-on environment with the computers, in the presence of a user educator. This instruction is related to their courses work, preparing assignments (essays, projects, dissertations, theses, etc.) and other academic needs. The staff demonstrates examples of all kinds of material including areas such as creating a search strategy, finding books and articles on a particular topic, using specific subject databases and valuating print and electronic sources.

## **Course-related instruction**

The JRULM offers course-related instruction for most users. This type of instruction works best for classes with research assignments because students feel a genuine need for the information that is directly related to their course. Library instructors and subject specialists in the JRULM believe that user education should be scheduled as closely as possible to the time when students begin working on their assignments and other projects. If this instruction session occurs too ahead of time of the

commencement of their research, they may not benefit as much from the instruction programme.

Library user education expert in the JRULM expressed that library and information skills improve when those skills are course related. The benefits of course related instruction is that students may lead to earn better grades as they will know how to find relevant and better information resources to support their research papers, projects, proposals and other assignments.

### **Library instruction for the public or external users**

The JRULM runs an extensive exhibition programme for the public to help in using the library through guided tours of the library for groups of up to 20 people only for nominal charges. This may either be of a general nature or customized for a particular subject interest. In the library many rooms are available, including the Muriel Stott Conference Centre built in the central quadrangle of the library, to hire for conducting seminars, talks and private functions. The library also publishes a free six-monthly newsletter which is sent to all interested ones.

### **Inter library loans (ILL) service**

The users are informed in the user education programme about the ILL facility. In the JRULM the ILL service is run by the Document Supply Unit, which endeavours to supply readers with material necessary for academic purposes but is not existed in the library. Most items are acquired from the British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC), despite close cooperation with neighbouring universities in Greater Manchester. 'Deliver' is a service for photocopies and loans by post. That is available to authorised members of the University of Manchester. 'Deliver for all' is available to any person, whether or not a member of the university.

### **The need of user education for faculty / academic staff**

Data were also collected on the need for user education for academic staff. It was established that academic staff was providing education for a better guidance to students by their teachers and for strengthening the scholarly output of research by academic staff. Respondents suggested that attempts should be made to convince the academic staff about the need and worth of user education and librarianship. However, there is no compulsion on new staff for receiving any library user training or giving evidence that they already possess the necessary skills.

### **Feedback from the users**

The question was asked as to whether there is a serious need to study the basic composite requirements of all groups of library users in university libraries. According to the library user education experts in the JRULM, overseas students face serious problems in identifying and assessing resources in electronic networks. The librarian asserted that there is a great need of investigating the users' demands from the user perspective so that user-friendly systems are developed in system design. The JRULM has not conducted any such formal study about the needs of its users. This appears to be a weak area of the programme.

However, some subject specialists invite informal or formal feedback to seek improvement of the user education they provide. Analysis shows that the students' response to user education is positive. Students have found the programme enjoyable if it was related to their specialist field's related problems. It was also pointed out that students did not want to spend much time attending the instruction sessions for learning a system; they want to start using it.

### **Interaction between library and academic staff**

The user-education library expert in JRULM stated that the role of the academic staff is vital in an effective user education programme. To achieve the goal of user education library and

academic staff must work closely. Academic staff can cooperate with the library staff in motivating and directing students in academic library use. There must be collaboration between the library staff and academic staff to develop teaching strategies using the latest technologies.

The study suggests that the ideal situation would be that faculty members set exercises for their students (and that carry marks towards their progress). These could be at the beginning of the year or during the course. This would motivate them towards good practice.

### **Should user education be compulsory?**

The user education experts recommended strongly that user education must be compulsory for all users, because user education helps developing information seeking and critical skills independently. Students and teachers responses also emphasised on that as a lot of latest information is accessible via Internet. The information explosion has accelerated the need for development of such expert system. The concept of library user education has also transformed and expanded to information literacy and learning for life. It reduces the library staff's time and efforts in solving individual problems regarding the use of library services. The JRULM Library user education programme supports the concept of information literacy. It prepares library users to exploit information effectively in any circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

The developed countries have very advanced library systems (as in the JRULM) with extensive instructional services programmes planned to educate students, faculty and administrative staff. They strive to support the teaching, learning and research goals of the university. One of their goals is to provide reference and instructional services for the university community. It supports each individual's ability to use research information resources effectively.

In JRULM, the instructional services programme is considered important to all the members of its university community, but the student community (both engaged in course work and research) is its key focus. The specialist professionals recommended that for students to become truly information literate, the best way is for information literacy to be integrated into the university's core curriculum. The empirical research has shown a number of factors that affect the successful execution of user education i.e., students' previous library use experience, provision of library use instruction in school and college libraries, library staff's attitudes, collaboration among faculty and library staff, provision of library facilities for educating the users, library expenditures and technological change.

User education programmes in Pakistani university libraries. New technology must not only be seen as providing new ways of data communication but also be applied to new administrative structure and systems of supply of traditional materials. It is shown clearly that no further effective planning for development can take place without a better assessment of the context in which the university libraries of Pakistan are functioning.

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