INFORMATION SKILLS COURSE (GXEX1401): A SURVEY OF ITS EFFECTIVENESS AS PERCEIVED BY STUDENTS

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Abstract: The Information Skills Programme was formally introduced as a compulsory one-credit university course to all first year students pursuing an undergraduate degree in the University of Malaya in the 1998/1999 academic session. The objective of the Course is to equip students with basic information skills and techniques that will equip them for life-long learning. This report presents the views of some 1000 students on the usefulness of the topics taught in the Course in relation to searching information in the Library and to their learning as well as their assignments. The findings from the survey indicate that students in the first year are more concerned with locating materials prescribed in their reading lists than with searching for additional reference materials from periodical indexes or abstracts, whether printed or electronic. Almost 90% of the students rank OPAC as useful, followed by Search Strategy (85%) and Project Work (79.75%).

Abstrak: Kursus Kemahiran Maklumat diperkenalkan sebagai kursus universiti kepada semua pelajar tahun pertama yang mengikuti ijazah pertama di Universiti Malaya semenjak sesi akademik 1998/1999. Objektif kursus ini adalah untuk melengkapkan semua pelajar dengan kemahiran maklumat dan teknik pencarian yang akan menyediakan mereka dalam pembelajaran sepanjang umur. Laporan ini mengemukakan pendapat lebih kurang 1000 pelajar samada topik-topik yang diajar dalam Kursus bermanfaat dan membantu mereka dalam pencarian maklumat di Perpustakaan dan dalam pembelajaran serta tugasan di Universiti. Maklumbalas dari soalselidik menunjukkan bahawa pelajar tahun pertama lebih menumpukan kepada pencarian bahan dari senarai

bacaan mereka untuk mendapatkan buku-buku teks yang disyorkan oleh pensyarah mereka dari mendapatkan bacaan rujukan tambahan daripada indeks dan abstrak jurnal, samada bercetak atau elektronik seperti pangkalan data CD-ROM. Oleh itu, topik-topik yang dianggap sebagai bermanfaat adalah OPAC (90%), diikuti dengan Strategi Pencarian (85%) dan Projek (79.75%)

Introduction

The Information Skills Course or *Kursus Kemahiran Maklumat* (GXEX1401) as it is known, was first introduced as a compulsory one credit university course to all first year students pursuing an undergraduate degree in the University of Malaya in the 1998/1999 academic session. The main objective of the Course is to teach students basic information skills and techniques that are critical for life-long learning and resource-based teaching. Students are also taught certain basic IT skills which would enable them to use and exploit information from the OPAC, indexes and abstracts on CD-ROM format, online databases as well as the Internet.

As this is the first time that a formalised information skills course is conducted by the Library, there is a need to evaluate the Course. Results of the final examination and the coursework undertaken by students for the course, indicated that a majority of students have benefited from it. Professional staff at the Reference Desk also reported that enquiries on OPAC made by University of Malaya students was minimal. However it was felt that there is a need to know what students think about the Course. A questionnaire was therefore designed and distributed to a number of students. Its purpose was to get students' feedback as to the effectiveness and usefulness of the Course as well as the effectiveness of the facilitators.

Methodology

Students were picked at random to answer the questionnaire which was distributed during the last lecture of the Semester. The questionnaire (Appendix I) was distributed to students at the end of Second Semester of the 1999/2000 academic session and the first semester of the 2000/2001 session.

The total number of students registered for the course in the second semester, 1999/2000 session was 2652, the majority of whom were students from the science and technology faculties, namely the Faculty of Science, Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Built Environment, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Dentistry and Sports Centre. Out of this, 577 students (27.8%) were picked at random to answer the questionnaire. The same questionnaire was also distributed to 430 students (14.5%) from a total of 3017 who registered from the first semester, 2000/2001 academic session. The latter comprised largely students in the arts and social science faculties namely the Academy of Islamic Studies, Academy of Malay Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Faculty of Economics and Administration, Faculty of Business and Accounting, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics and Cultural Centre.

The questionnaire consisted of 3 sections. Section 1 collected data on students ranking of the usefulness of the given topics for information searching and learning, and their assignments. For each topic, students were asked to rank it by marking one of the 5 indicators, ranging from 'Very Useful' to 'Not Very Useful'.

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In Section 2, students were asked to indicate the effectiveness of their facilitators, from 'Very Effective' to 'Very Ineffective', and in the last section, they were requested to give their comments and suggestions for the course. This report will discuss the first two sections only.

Findings

The findings of the questionnaire are presented in tables and charts. *For ease of discussion, respondents in the Second Semester, 1999/2000 academic session are referred to as science students while respondents in the First Semester, 2000/2001 academic session as social science students.*

Topic	Very Useful		Useful		Moderate		Not Useful		Not Very Useful		Total Respondents
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
OPAC	279	48.6	242	42.7	49	8.5	3	0.5	1	0.2	574
Search Strategy	202	35.2	291	50.7	78	13.6	3	0.5	0	0.0	574
Reference Sources	95	16.6	233	40.8	225	39.4	13	2.3	5	0.9	571
A & I in CD-ROM	80	14.0	181	24.6	272	47.5	32	5.6	8	1.4	573
Citation Style	95	16.5	268	46.5	198	34.4	14	2.4	1	0.2	576
Project Work	156	26.9	280	48.4	126	21.8	14	2.4	1	0.2	577

Table 1: Response of Science and Technology Students To All Topics

| Topic	Very Useful		Useful		Moderate		Not Useful		Not Very Useful		Total Respondents
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
OPAC	242	57.6	152	36.2	26	6.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	420
Search Strategy	171	40.3	193	45.5	49	13.9	1	0.2	0	0.0	424
Reference Sources	90	21.4	187	44.4	137	32.5	6	1.4	1	0.2	421
A & I in CD-ROM	96	22.4	187	43.6	134	31.2	10	2.3	2	0.5	429
Citation Style	117	27.2	203	47.2	104	24.2	6	1.4	0	0.0	430
Project Work	165	38.5	196	45.7	57	13.3	10	2.3	1	0.2	429

Table 2: Response of Arts and Social Science Students To All Topics

OPAC

This topic is covered in 3 lectures during which students were taught how to access OPAC and search by Author, Title, Subject, Author Keyword, Title Keyword, Subject Keyword, Keywords, Expert Keywords as well as by Call Number. They were also taught how to interpret the bibliographic as well as holdings information of each record.

The following graph represents students' view on the usefulness of OPAC:
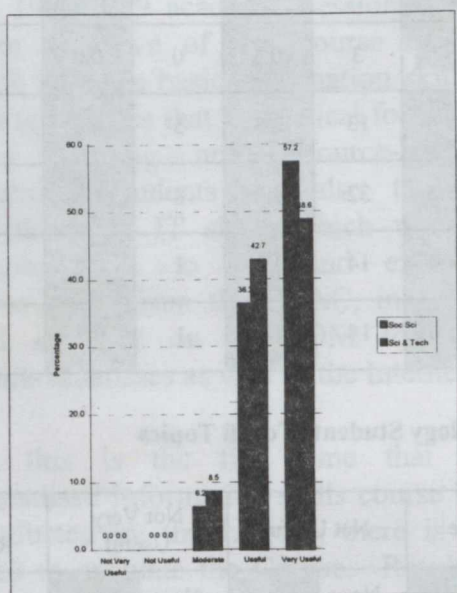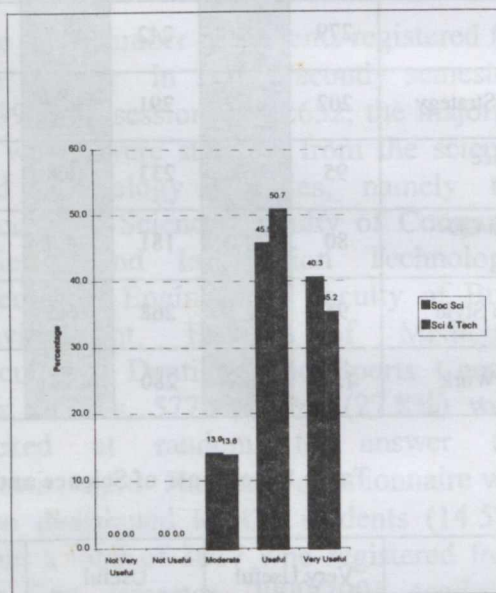

Graph 1 : Usefulness of OPAC

The graph shows that a large majority of the science students in Semester 2, 1999/2000 found OPAC useful; 279 students (48.6%) found OPAC very useful, 242 (42.7%) useful, while 8.5% of these respondents found it moderately useful. None reported that they did not find it at all useful. Majority of the social science students who responded shared similar opinions; 242 students (57.6%) found OPAC very useful, 152 (36.2%) useful and 26 (6.2%) moderately useful. None

also indicated that OPAC was not useful at all.

Search Strategy

Students were taught techniques to strategise their search by understanding and identifying the concepts in their search topic, finding keywords and constructing a search statement using the relevant Boolean operators such as 'AND', 'OR' and 'NOT'.

Graph 2 indicates the views of students on this topic.

**Graph 2: Usefulness of Search Strategy**

According to the students of both semesters, Search Strategy was useful. However the ranking was lower than OPAC. Two hundred and two science students (35.2%) ranked it as 'Very Useful' while 291 (50.7%) of them ranked it is 'Useful'. Only 3 (0.5%) ranked it as 'Not Useful'. The response of the social science students was similar to the science students. One hundred and seventy-one respondents (40.3%) considered Search Strategy as 'Very Useful' while 193 (45.5%) said it was 'Useful' while only 1 (0.2 %) felt it was 'Not Useful'. None of

the students in both groups ranked Search Strategy as 'Not Very Useful'.

Reference Sources

Students were also taught how to use printed reference sources such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, indexes and abstracts to locate information. Although the number of electronic databases are increasing, it was felt that the knowledge of printed sources is still important and that students should be made aware of and learnt to use these important reference sources.
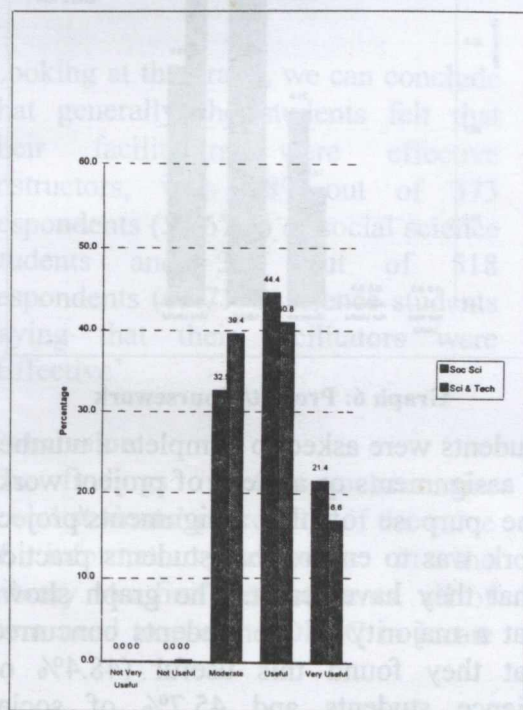
Graph 3:   Usefulness of Reference Sources

The graph shows that both science and social science students perceived this topic as useful though not as 'Very Useful' as the earlier two topics. Only 95 (16.6%) science students and 90 (21.4%) social science students thought it was 'Very Useful', while 233 (40.8%) science students and 187 (44.4%) social science students ranked it 'Useful'. A large number of students,

225 (39.4%) science students and 137 (32.5%) science students had also rated this topic as ' Moderately Useful'. More science students ranked this topic as 'Not Useful' (13, 2.3%) and 'Not Very Useful' (5, 0.9%) as compared to 6 (1.4%) and 1 (0.2%) social science students respectively.
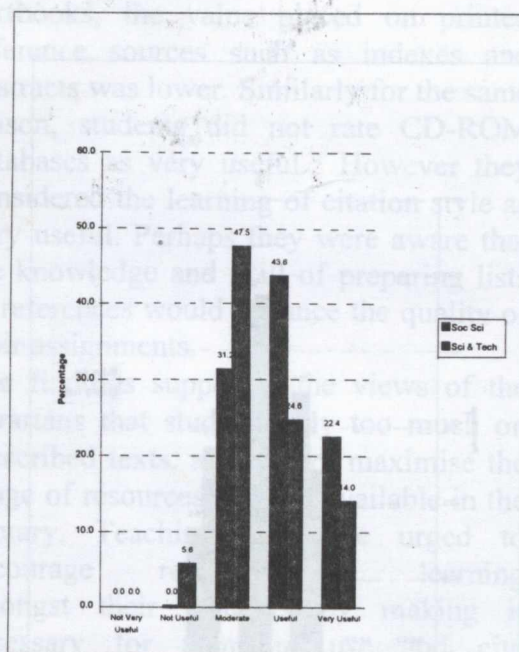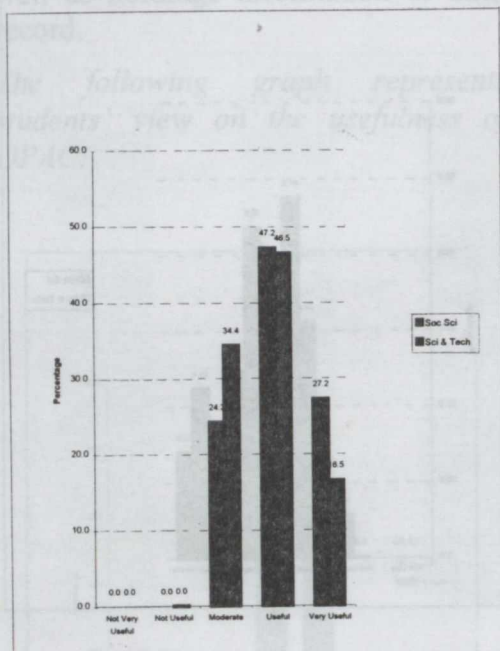

Graph 4:   Usefulness of CD-ROM

Here students were taught to identify titles of indexes and abstracts in CD-ROM format which were relevant to their respective disciplines as well to search for information using techniques which they had learnt in Search Strategy. Majority of the science students viewed this topic as 'Moderately Useful' (272, 47.5%), while only a smaller group (181, 24.6%) ranked it as 'Useful' and only 80 (14%) as 'Very Useful'. Eight science students considered it 'Not very Useful'. The social students placed greater importance on this topic, with 96 (22.4%) ranking it as 'Very Useful' and 187 (43.6%) as 'Useful', 134 (31.2%) as 'Moderately Useful', 10 (2.3%) as ''Not Useful and 2 (0.5%) as 'Not Very Useful'.

To round up the course, students were taught how to cite the resources that they have located and used in their assignments. For the purpose of the course, they were taught either the APA (American Psychological Association) or MLA (Modern Language Association) Citation Style.


Graph 5: Usefulness of Citation Style

The above graph shows that the majority of the students perceived Citation Style as 'Useful' (46.5% of science students and 47.2% of social science students). Ninety-five science students (16.5%) and 117 social science students (27.2%) ranked it as 'Very Useful' with 198 science students (34.4%) and 104 (24.2%) social science students ranking it as 'Moderately Useful'. More science students thought it as 'Not Useful (14) and "Not Very Useful' (1) as compared to only 6 social science students who thought it was 'Not Useful'.

The above findings show that students understood the importance of recording and citing the materials they

used in a consistent manner. They perceived the importance of proper documentation style in their assignments.

Project/Course Work
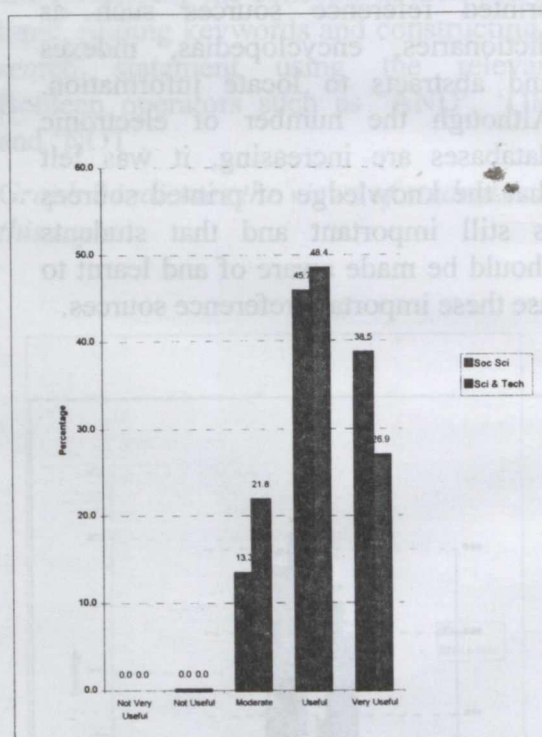
Graph 6: Project/ Coursework

Students were asked to complete a number of assignments or a piece of project work. The purpose of the assignments/project work was to ensure that students practice what they have learnt. The graph shows that a majority of the students concurred that they found this useful (48.4% of science students and 45.7% of social science students) only one science and one social science student felt that the Assignments/ Project Work was 'Not Very Useful'.

Evaluation of Facilitators

Students were also asked to evaluate their facilitators. Since the slides and contents were prepared by a team of librarians, students were only asked to evaluate the presentation styles of their facilitators. Graph 6 shows the feedback of students.
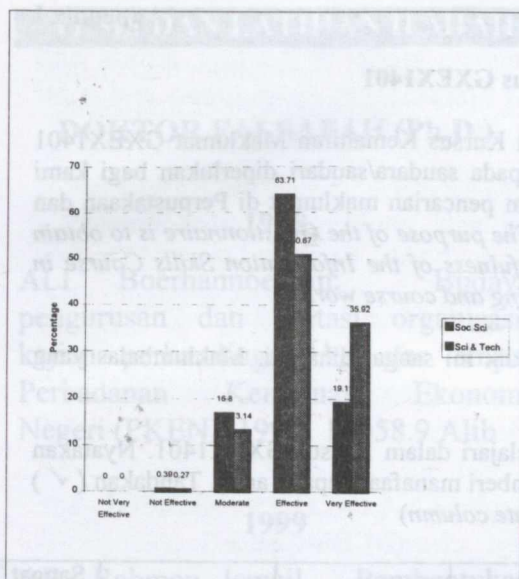
Graph 7: Effectiveness of Facilitators Presentation

Looking at the graph, we can conclude that generally the students felt that their facilitators were effective instructors, with 189 out of 373 respondents (50.67%) of social science students and 330 out of 518 respondents (63.71%) science students saying that their facilitators were 'Effective'.

Conclusion

The findings of the questionnaire reveal students' perception of the value of information resources in the Library. As first year students, all of them need to use the OPAC to locate materials in their reading lists and to search the relevant books for their assignments/ essays. As such, both the science and social science stream students rated very highly the usefulness and effectiveness of OPAC. Since at year one, they were not required by their lecturers to locate information from periodicals or other sources other than prescribed textbooks, the value placed on printed reference sources such as indexes and abstracts was lower. Similarly for the same reason, students did not rate CD-ROM databases as very useful. However they considered the learning of citation style as very useful. Perhaps they were aware that the knowledge and skill of preparing lists of references would enhance the quality of their assignments.

The findings supported the views of the librarians that students rely too much on prescribed texts, and do not maximise the usage of resources that are available in the Library. Teaching staff are urged to encourage resource-based learning amongst their students by making it necessary for them to use and cite materials other than their textbooks, including periodical articles, CD-ROM and online databases, and insisting that these materials be cited consistently. With academic staff support and encouragement, we are confident that students will learn and apply what they have been taught with greater enthusiasm.

Soalselidik Mengenai Kursus GXEX1401

Tujuan soalselidik ini adalah untuk menilai keberkesanan Kursus Kemahiran Maklumat GXEX1401 bagi meningkatkan kualiti kursus ini. Maklumbalas daripada saudara/saudari diperlukan bagi kami menyelidik samada kursus ini telah membantu anda dalam pencarian maklumat di Perpustakaan dan dalam pembelajaran serta tugasan-tugasan di Universiti. (*The purpose of the Questionnaire is to obtain feedback from students as to their perception of the usefulness of the Information Skills Course in equipping them with information searching skills for learning and course work*)

Kerjasama yang anda berikan dengan menjawab soalselidik ini sangat dihargai. Maklumbalas yang anda berikan adalah sulit.

I. Senarai di bawah adalah topik-topik yang telah dipelajari dalam Kursus GXEX1401. Nyatakan setakat mana pengajaran mengenai topik tersebut memberi manafaat kepada anda. Tandakan (✓) pada ruang yang berkenaan. (*Please tick the appropriate column*)

	Sangat Manfaat (*Very Useful*)	Manfaat (*Useful*)	Sederhana (*Moderately useful*)	Tidak Manfaat (*Not useful*)	Sangat Tidak Manfaat (*Not very useful*)
1. Penggunaan Katalog Berkomputer (OPAC)					
2. Strategi Pencarian (*Search Strategies*)					
3. Penggunaan bahan-bahan referensi (kamus, ensiklopedia, indeks & abstrak) (*Reference Source*)					
4. Penggunaan pangkalan data CD-ROM (*CD-ROM Database*)					
5. Gaya mencatat rujukan (*Citation Style*)					
6. Projek (*Project Work*)					

II. Pada pandangan anda, bagaimanakah kualiti penyampaian fasilitator kumpulan anda ketika beliau mengajar kursus ini. (*Please evaluate the effectiveness of your facilitator*)

Sangat Berkesan (*Very effective*)	Berkesan (*Effective*)	Sederhana (*Moderately effective*)	Tidak Berkesan (*Not effective*)	Sangat Tidak Berkesan (*Not very effective*)

III. Sila beri komen dan cadangan anda mengenai kursus ini:-
(*Please give your comments and suggestions for the course*)