

# Library User Education Prominence: Perspectives of Final-Year Students and Subject Reference Librarians from the University of Limpopo

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## Abstract

University libraries have a mandate to provide library user education to guarantee optimal, effective and efficient utilisation of costly information resources and services. This study examines library user education programmes from the perspectives of undergraduate final-year students and subject librarians at the University of Limpopo (UL). The population of 260 student participants were selected using a simple systematic sampling method, while subject librarians were selected using a purposive sampling method. The results reveal that the majority of final-year students attended user education programmes such as library orientation, information literacy, bibliographic instruction, and the ongoing programme on the use of the library, Turnitin, and RefWorks. Most undergraduate final-year students who attended user education programmes indicated that they are now able to search for information from the library catalogue and use other information retrieval tools, as well as to evaluate the information retrieved. However, the librarians expressed that insufficient time for user education sessions, inadequate facilities and venues, inaccessible social media tools, delays in implementing LibGuides, non-attendance by students, and a lack of collaboration from the stakeholders as challenges they encounter in delivering user education programmes. The study recommends that librarians should intensify their marketing of library user education programmes through communicating the perspectives of attendees to the university management. Strong collaboration between academics, librarians and students is also recommended.

**Keywords:** subject librarians; user education programmes; University of Limpopo; bibliographic instruction; library orientation; information literacy



## Introduction

For academic libraries to support universities to accomplish their academic, educational, research and community development and outreach projects, they must acquire information resources, organise them for easy access by users and then disseminate them to the academic community and ensure that these costly information resources are optimally utilised (Murray and Ireland 2018). However, this is not easy for academic libraries because they are confronted with increased competition for limited resources and funding from other centres or units operating within the universities (Kyrillidou 2018). This competition compels academic libraries to substantiate and justify whatever financial costs they spend on library information resources and services intended for the benefit of library users (Tait, Martzoukou, and Reid 2016). Subsequently, there is a need for academic libraries to make potential library users aware of information resources and services that are available and how to best access and exploit these resources and services. Uwakwe, Onyeneke and Njoku (2016) assert that there cannot be any link between library users and the academic library resources and services if there is no appropriate education or training provided to library users who do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to exploit library resources and services. Therefore, the delivery of library user education programmes to students is among one of the core mandates of university libraries. User education programmes in university libraries are designed to enhance students' basic research and information searching and retrieval skills, to support their critical thinking abilities and to prepare them for life-long learning (Saliba 2021). Library user education is also prompted by the fact that students are required to cope with the body of knowledge that grows every day in every discipline, including literature and resources for managing new information and knowledge. This growth of knowledge, information and its resources is triggered further by the application of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in university libraries, coupled with the explosion and proliferation of information sources, both in hardcopy and digitised formats (Abah, Chorun, and Mbatsoror 2016; Omeluzor et al. 2017).

In order to provide unmediated access to information resources and services, the University of Limpopo (UL) library has subscribed to a number of e-book collections and several electronic databases such as Ebscohost, SABINET, ScienceDirect, Jstor, and Proquest, as well as to bibliographic reference management software such as RefWorks and Mendeley, including plagiarism detection software (Turnitin). To date, the total expenditure for all electronic resources (e-books, library software, online databases, online research management software, and other discovery tools) consumes 95% of the UL library's operational budget (University of Limpopo 2019). These expenses continually raise a growing concern about the extent to which the costly information resources are being utilised by the intended recipients, that is, academic staff and students. Therefore, for library users who are not aware of these library resources and who lack skills and competencies to utilise them, the UL library intervenes through running library instruction or user education programmes, ranging

from a general introduction to the library in the form of library orientation or a library tour, to detailed, advanced, formalised bibliographic instruction and information literacy programmes, including other short sessions for demonstrating new tools in the market for library users.

After undergoing these library user education programmes, it is expected that most students would have gained much improved information searching and retrieval skills and abilities, especially when they reach their final year or honours level where they must conduct research as part of their academic qualification. Despite the students having attended these library instruction or user education programmes, a number of studies on the connection between library user education and usage of library services and resources reveal that most of the students practically encounter challenges in searching for, retrieving and using information for their academic and research tasks (Abah, Chorun, and Mbatsonon 2016; Dubicki 2013; Lwehabura 2018; Maduako 2013; Mahwasane and Mudzielwana 2016). Students seem unable to remember and apply new information gained through attendance of user education programmes, hence the incapability of students to utilise library resources and services. This situation makes one wonder about the prominence and quality of user education programmes delivered, which warrants research and evaluation from the perspective of both the presenters and the beneficiaries, that is, librarians and students. Therefore, this study examines the importance of user education programmes from the perspectives of undergraduate final-year students and librarians at the UL library. The study sought to:

- establish the user education programmes that undergraduate final-year students at UL have attended during their studies at the university;
- discover reasons for non-attendance of user education programmes from the undergraduate final-year students who did not attend any of the programmes provided by UL library;
- measure perception levels of undergraduate final-year students towards the importance of the user education programmes attended at the UL library; and
- identify the challenges experienced by librarians in offering user education programmes at the UL library.

An insight into the opinions of students (the beneficiaries) and subject librarians (the deliverers) on the prominence and quality of the user education programmes would perhaps be of assistance for improving and developing future user education or library instruction programmes not only at UL, but at other university libraries as well. Undergraduate final-year students are those who are either in the third or fourth year of their studies. These students were specifically chosen for this study as it is assumed that they would have attended one or two of the user education programmes on offer during their career at the university. Subject librarians could also provide a basis for the

development of intervention to improve the provision of library user education programmes, not only at UL, but in the country as a whole.

## Literature Review

User education or instruction is part of a learning programme. All learning programmes apply pedagogical approaches based on behavioural, cognitive or constructivist learning theories and principles or a combination of these (Ertmer and Newby 2013; Schunk 2012). These theories and principles of learning have also gained a far-reaching recognition in the library and information field, more especially in educating and training library users to use library resources effectively (Mahwasane 2016). It is therefore important for user education librarians to acquaint themselves with these learning theories and principles in order to plan and implement library instruction or user education programmes around them (Arp, Woodard, and Mestre 2006; Johnson 2008). This study specifically adopts behaviourist learning theory, which is concerned with the learner as an active participant who must react to some environmental stimuli (Johnson 2008; Kay and Kibble 2016). This entails that learning occurs when there are observable changes in the performance of the learner that are demonstrated after being exposed to some specific environmental stimuli (Ertmer and Newby 2013). In this study library user education programmes are equated to the environmental stimuli that the students come into contact with in an academic institution. Observable changes in the performance of the learner are therefore measured through their perceptions of user education programmes.

Several scholars have emphasised a positive relationship between user education and library usage by students (Liu et al. 2019; Maduako 2013). The library user education programmes are anticipated to have positive effects on students' learning outcomes, research practices, and self-motivation for independent learning (Healey 2014). This was confirmed by various studies that looked into the potential benefits that students gain after attending library user education programmes in South Africa (Molepo and Bopape 2018; Reetseng 2016) and in Nigeria (Oluwunmi, Durodola, Ajayi 2016; Uwakwe, Onyeneke, and Njoku 2016). Therefore, user education has the potential "to encourage and transform learners into independent, self-directed and lifelong learners" (Folorunso and Njoku 2016, 290). Lockhart (2015) confirms that running a short course in user education improved information literacy skills of students and their application of such skills in essay assignments at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Bangani et al. (2020) also found the subject taught during an information literacy programme provided at the North-West University to be very useful for economics students.

Students have mixed perceptions regarding the importance of library user education programmes in academic institutions. However, most of the studies have shown that students view library user education programmes as contributing towards supporting their academic work (Punchihewa et al. 2018). The study done by Lo et al. (2021) found that students at Sun Yat-Sen University in China place a high value on the importance

of library user education programmes. Similarly, Liu, Lo and Itsumura (2016) indicated that the majority of students consider library user education an important part of their formal academic learning. On the contrary, the study conducted by Moyane, Dube and Hoskins (2015, 37) discovered that

although there are pockets of good behaviour in user education [at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Westville Campus], there is a need to reconsider the content, the mode, the scope, presentation strategies and overall relevance and suitability of user education programmes in line with user needs. ... There is also a need to consider issues of appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of instructional methods and pedagogical matters.

Folorunso and Njoku (2016) recognise that the internal and external factors, that is, the environment in which the academic library is operating, affect the quality of the structure, aspects taught, the content as well as the duration of library user education programmes (Cordell 2013). There are three basic components of library user education, namely, library orientation, bibliographic instruction, and information literacy (Chen and Lin 2011; Joint 2005; Singh 2010). Library orientation is concerned with introducing new and potential library users to the general academic library services, facilities and physical layout. Bibliographic instruction is concerned with teaching library users how to make use of information resources such as reference materials and other bibliographic tools in their specific subject fields. Information literacy, on the other hand, is concerned with educating users on recognising the need for information, and how to identify, locate, analyse, evaluate and use information and its sources (ALA 2000). The concepts bibliographic instruction and information literacy are also used interchangeably to connote instruction on the use of information access tools such as library catalogues, indexes, abstracts, reference materials such as encyclopaedias, dictionaries, almanacs, as well as online databases and other tools that aid library users to access information (Su 2014).

Jiyane and Onyancha (2010, 11) note that “most university libraries offer information literacy, known by different titles or names, and further that there are common and uncommon topics offered to students in the information literacy programmes in different university libraries.” Tshuma and Chigada (2018) found that academic libraries in Zimbabwe use different and incoherent methods in teaching information literacy education. Therefore, teaching methods and approaches used for user education programmes differ from one university library to another. Davids and Omar (2018) confirm that some user education programmes are provided as separate programmes and others are integrated or embedded into the curriculum. Some university libraries adopt classroom teaching, where students are guided through hands-on exercise (Omeluzor et al. 2017). Therefore, identifying the user education programme offered at UL that undergraduate final-year students would have attended will provide insight into the root of the research problem that guides this study.

Idoko, Asogwa, and Ugwuanyi (2015, 4) note that “library user education is subject to a number of factors which militate against it.” The deliverers of user education programmes, that is, librarians, identify several challenges affecting an all-out provision of user education programmes in academic libraries (Hart and Davids 2010). Among the impediments identified are low turnout for user education programmes by students (Moyane, Dube, and Hoskins 2015), the absence of interest shown on the part of the academics (Molepo and Bopape 2018), insufficient time allocated for library instruction (Kozak and Kaskie 2014), underutilisation of information technology in the instruction, and bad timing of user education sessions (Idoko, Asogwa, Ugwuanyi 2015; Madukoma et al. 2013). Perhaps it is for this reason that the “integration of library instruction into the academic curriculum has been identified as the best possible solution for everyone to attend this important programme” (Moselen and Wang 2014; Zhang, Goodman, and Xie 2015). Other problems relate to “a lack of librarians’ teaching skills, coupled with information overload, where students are overwhelmed with high volumes of information within a short period of time” (Pant and Negi 2015). The views from user education presenters about the challenges could perhaps also shed some light on the cause of the research problem.

## Methodology

This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies through interviews with eight subject librarians and the administration of a questionnaire with 260 undergraduate final-year students. From the students, the researcher solicited information about user education programmes that they attended and their perceptions of the importance of these user education programmes. From subject librarians, the interviews solicited information about the challenges they encountered in conducting and delivering user education programmes. This study employed systematic random sampling to arrive at a sampling frame from the undergraduate final-year students’ population and purposively selected the subject librarians as participants for this study. Of the final-year students who participated in the study, 102 (39%) were attached to the Faculty of Humanities, 59 (23%) were attached to the Faculty of Management and Law, 78 (30%) were registered in the Faculty of Science and Agriculture, and, finally, 21 (8%) were registered in the Faculty of Health Sciences. Quantitative data from undergraduate final-year students is analysed and presented in the form of bar graphs, while qualitative data is analysed by categorising similar responses into themes.

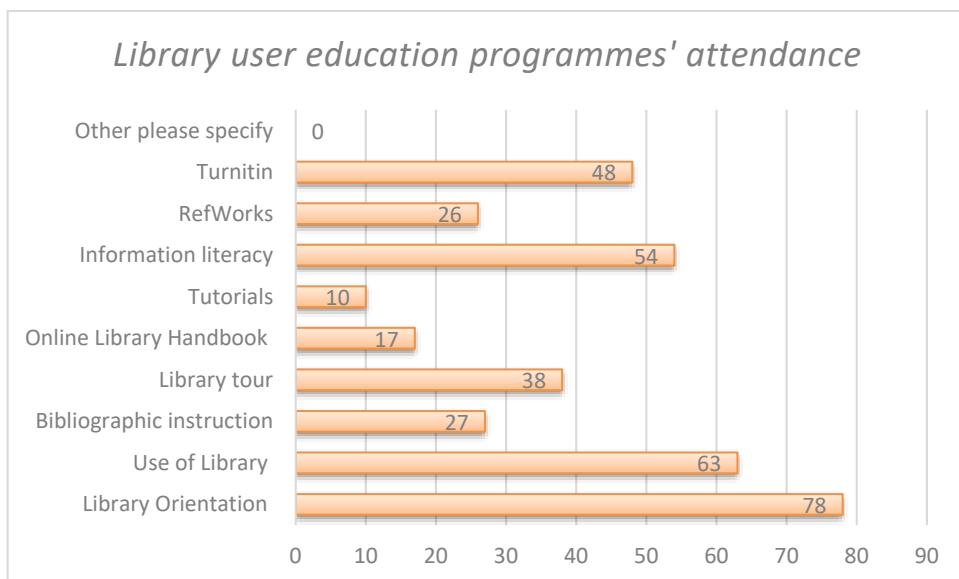
## Results and Discussion

The first question that was asked to the respondents was whether they attended any user education programme offered at UL library. The results show that out of 260 respondents, 107 (41%) of the students did not attend the library user education programmes, while 153 (59%) attended the programmes. For those who did not attend any user education programmes, it was found that 89 (83%) were not aware of any user education programmes, and 18 (17%) said they did not have time to attend library user education programmes. The findings are similar to the study conducted by Moyane,

Dube and Hoskins (2015) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) which found that most students acknowledged they knew about the library's user education programmes, while some claimed they had no knowledge of those user education programmes. Liu (2017) stipulates that most of the time students do not join user education programmes offered by the library because they do not understand the information well.

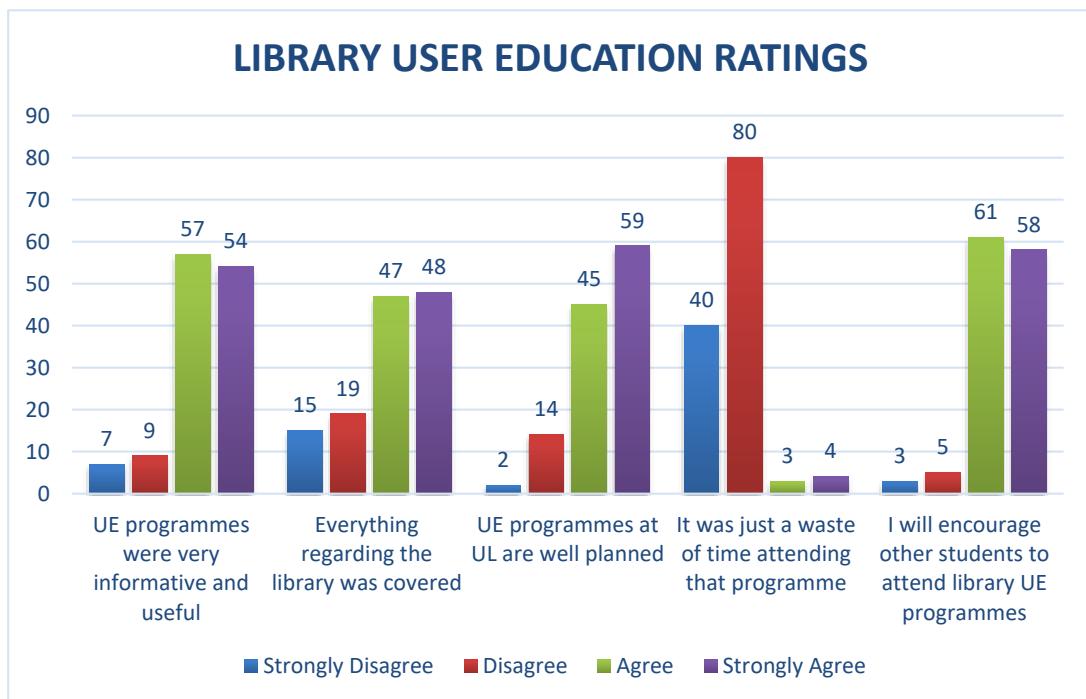
The respondents who attended user education programmes were asked to indicate by means of a tick on a list the programmes offered that they had attended. The findings in Figure 1 below reveal that the majority of the respondents (78; 51%) attended library orientation; 63 (41%) attended the programme on the use of the library; 54 (35%) attended a programme on information literacy; 48 (31%) attended a programme on Turnitin; 38 (24%) attended a library tour; 27 (17%) attended bibliographic instruction; 26 (17%) attended training on RefWorks; 17 (11%) read the online library handbook, and 10 (6%) attended library tutorials. These results confirm the observation that in most African university libraries, popular user education programmes appear to be library tours and library orientation (Baro and Keboh 2012; Omeluzor et al. 2017).

However, this approach to library instruction may not be in a position to embed the required information searching skills for the optimal usage of library resources and services. As for information literacy education, it has been observed that this approach to library user education has become one of the main programmes presented by many university libraries and is generally considered one of the means through which users' information skills are enhanced in the institutions of higher learning (Hassani and Nfissi 2015; Jiyane and Onyancha 2010; Swapna and Biradar 2017).



**Figure 1:** Library user education programme attended ( $N = 153$ )

Furthermore, a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree) was used to express the respondents' perceptions about the usefulness of user education programmes. Among some of the responses with the highest scores, as depicted in Figure 2 below, are that 80 (52%) of the respondents "disagree" that library user education programmes are just a waste of time, followed by those who "agree" and "strongly agree" that they will encourage other students to attend the user education programme, with 61 (40%) and 58 (38%) respondents respectively. Fifty-nine (38%) respondents also "strongly agree" that user education programmes are well planned, while 57 (37%) and 54 (35%) respondents "agree" and "strongly agree" respectively that user education programmes are very informative and useful. With regard to whether everything concerning the library was covered in the user education programmes that they attended, 47 (38%) respondents "agree," while 48 (39%) "strongly agree" with the statement.



**Figure 2:** Library user education ratings ( $N = 153$ )

These results show that the undergraduate final-year students positively perceive user education programmes at UL as important and adequate. User education has positively affected the students' use of library resources, and ultimately their academic success. This is confirmed by the studies conducted by Molepo and Bopape (2018), Oluwunmi, Durodola, Ajayi (2016), and Uwakwe, Onyeneke and Njoku (2016). The students at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University Library also emphasised that the user education training programme that they attended was "valuable and required," not only

for their academic success, but also “for various aspects of their life, studies and career” (Reetseng 2016).

When asked about the changes that they experienced with regard to their library usage, the highest response rate is 70 (46%) respondents who “agree” that they are able to evaluate information after attending library user education programmes, followed by 69 (45%) respondents who “agree” that they can now search the library catalogue and other information retrieval tools, and then 60 (39%) who “agree” that user education programmes made them aware of available library resources. The findings are depicted in Figure 3 below. Critical evaluation of information sources accessed is essential and an integral component of information literacy (Landøy, Popa, and Repanovici 2020).



**Figure 3:** Changes in the performance of students ( $N = 153$ )

Behaviourist learning theory in this study is mainly concerned with the impact of user education programmes on students’ information-seeking behaviour. It was found that attendance of user education programmes improves students’ ability to find relevant information through the library catalogue and other information sources in the library (Atanda and Ugwulebo 2017). The study conducted by Molepo and Bopape (2018) at

Tshwane University of Technology showed that after attendance of information literacy programmes, students became familiar with some of the library resources and their ability to use those resources improved. They changed from novices to advanced and proficient users of information.

This study also sought to examine the challenges experienced by subject librarians in delivering user education programmes. The challenges experienced in delivering user education programmes, as generally expressed by participants, have been categorised under the following themes: insufficient time for user education sessions, inadequate facilities and venues, inaccessible social media tools, delays in implanting LibGuides, non-attendance by students, and a lack of collaboration from the stakeholders.

### **Insufficient Time Allocated to Training**

Some of the respondents lamented the time allocated for user education programmes. Participant #6 said that “there is insufficient time allocated to training, as the sessions are not included in the university general class timetable,” while participant #8 said “a lack of time makes it difficult to arrange properly as timing is not specified.” The amount of time allocated for user education programmes by academics compromise the comprehensiveness of the content to be covered during user education sessions (Kozak and Kaskie 2014; Moyane, Dube, and Hoskins 2015).

### **Inadequate Facilities and Venues**

Another challenge was related to the venues that are used for library user education programmes. Participant #2 mentioned the following: “The venues for sessions are problematic as the ‘labs’ for training are to be applied for in advance and each lab with the capacity of one hundred students. If the lab is not booked in advance that affects the class as there won’t be a venue for that session.” Therefore, a lack of adequate infrastructure and computerisation militate against the delivery of user education programmes (Uwakwe, Onenyeke, and Njoku 2016).

### **Inaccessibility of Social Media Tools**

The respondents also complained about the inaccessibility to social media platforms that they believe can work for marketing and delivering user education programmes. One of the librarians (participant #4) had this to say:

Students stated a preference for social media platforms for information about user education. The challenge with this is that social media platforms are inaccessible during working hours, making it difficult for the staff to post in those times. The other issue would be students having to access the social media platforms after hours, which is not convenient for most students. In essence this makes marketing user education programmes problematic.

This response suggests in the era dominated by social media, academic libraries need to consider adopting them (Penzhorn 2013; Wessels and Knoetze 2013). Therefore, “viable methods and media such as ‘ask a librarian’, library blog, library website, social media, text messaging, emailing, and radio broadcasting should be explored” (Omeluzor et al. 2017, 20; see also Morgan, Saunders, and Shrem 2013).

### **LibGuides Not Going Live**

One of the challenges related to the provision of user education at the UL library concerns LibGuides, which subject librarians have developed, not going live on the library website. Some participants (participants #1 and #8) elaborated on the “challenge of LibGuides not going live; this simply means the subject librarians after creating the LibGuides, they have to share the link themselves.” “The ideal situation would be that upon completion of the lib-guide, it will go live and be made available on the university web page under the library menu.” LibGuides are a content-management and information-sharing system designed specifically for libraries on Web 2.0 platforms. They are online subject guides used by academic libraries to provide subject-based support to library users and serve as a platform for delivering information literacy support (Dalton and Pan 2014). Bangani and Tshetsha (2018) confirm that LibGuides, also referred to as pathfinders, encourage collaboration among librarians and academic staff. Chiware (2014) found LibGuides to be very useful for undergraduate economic students to support essay writing at the University of Cape Town.

### **Low Attendance of User Education Training by Undergraduate Students**

Poor attendance or low turnout by students is a common problem for user education programmes in a number of university libraries across the world (Moyane, Dube, and Hoskins 2015). Participant #5 said: “The major problem is that some of the faculties rely solely on the orientation programme which is not enough. This results in a relatively low attendance of user education training by undergraduate students as those students don’t attend information literacy classes. Other faculties are also not enrolling their students for information literacy.” The respondents named the faculties and schools that do not participate in user education programmes. Low attendance of user education programmes by students is closely related to a lack of collaboration between the stakeholders, more especially academic staff and students, which is discussed below.

### **A Lack of Partnerships between Stakeholders**

Participant #3 said: “The other impediment is the insubstantial partnerships between stakeholders (academics and students) and the library. If the partnership was substantial, then the academics would better motivate the students to attend the user education programmes and librarians to offer more subject specific content based on their modules.” Participant #4 specified that “it is important for academics to familiarise themselves with the information resources provided in the library so that they can transfer the knowledge and skills acquired to the students.” For librarians to provide effective user education to students, they should partner with relevant stakeholders, that

is, academic staff and students, because they are both essential to the effectiveness of library user education on the campus (Scales, Mathews, and Johnson 2005; Scheepers et al. 2011).

The results of the study reveal that out of 260 respondents, 107 (41%) of the students did not attend the library user education programmes, while 153 (59%) did attend a programme. For those who did not attend any user education programmes, it was found most of them were either not aware of any user education programmes or did not have time to attend. The respondents who attended went through either library orientation, information literacy and or bibliographic instruction. The final-year students also attended programmes on the use of the library and training on the use of tools such as Turnitin and RefWorks. The results also show that undergraduate final-year students positively perceive user education programmes because they “disagree” that it is “just a waste of time.” Others “agree” and “strongly agree” that they will encourage other students to attend user education programmes, while some further “agree” and “strongly agree” that user education programmes are well planned and very informative and useful. When asked about the changes that they experienced with regard to their library usage, the highest response rate goes to the respondents who “agree” that they are able to evaluate information after attending library user education programmes, followed by respondents who “agree” that they can now search the library catalogue and use other information retrieval tools, and lastly those who “agree” that user education programmes made them aware of available library resources. The challenges experienced in delivering user education programmes generally expressed by the subject librarians have been categorised under the following themes: insufficient time for user education sessions, inadequate facilities and venues, inaccessible social media tools, delays in implanting LibGuides, non-attendance by students, and a lack of collaboration from the stakeholders.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the results of the study show that there is a correlation between an awareness of user education programmes and the time needed to attend those programmes. Some students did not attend user education programmes because of a lack of awareness or time to attend the sessions. Although some students were aware of the user education programmes, they lacked time to attend the sessions. Therefore, the timing of some user education programmes was found to be one of the reasons sessions were not attended. User education programmes such as library orientation and information literacy are delivered during registration, after which the students have to engage with catch-up tasks. Therefore, there is a need for librarians to choose the right time for user education sessions and to identify the sources of information and effective methods for communicating or marketing user library education programmes. The findings also showed that library orientation is the most well attended user education programme. In most universities, user education programmes, especially library orientation and information literacy programmes, are targeted at new students only,

while students in the middle of their studies are not exposed to training on information-searching skills continually. It is for this reason that students struggle to retrieve information when they conduct research in the final year of their studies. The results further show that other students attended sessions on the use of the library. These are user education sessions conducted one-on-one with the students on an ongoing basis. Students who attended more than one user education programme are probably the ones who experienced positive changes in relation to their information-seeking behaviour. It is therefore recommended that user education programmes should be offered at all levels of the students' academic journey.

Most of the students who attended user education programmes recognise that library user instruction is useful and informative because the sessions are well planned. When looked at from the perspective of the theory on which this study is based, it is clear that students are empowered with useful information-seeking skills. This will have an impact on their quest for lifelong learning ventures. There is therefore a need to devise some means to evaluate user education programmes by the attendees and to communicate the results on students' perceptions of user education programmes to the university management, who will in turn encourage academics to release students to attend user education programmes continuously. The study further shows that although students have a positive perception of library user education programmes, subject librarians are experiencing some challenges in terms of delivering the sessions. Low attendance, a lack of physical infrastructure, insufficient time, reluctance on the use of social media tools, and a lack of collaboration are among the challenges experienced by subject librarians in delivering user education programmes. However, since this study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of venues and challenges relating to the use of social media and LibGuides are challenges of the past in the delivery of library user education programmes. It is presumed that the COVID 19 pandemic has forced library and information services to find new ways of delivering online user education programmes without them having to use venues with insufficient space. The finding that some librarians lamented the lack of partnerships between all the stakeholders shows that there is a need to strengthen the relationship between academic staff and subject librarians. Successful user education programmes require collaboration between the academics, librarians and the students.

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