

Preferred Types of Academic Websites Accessed and Used by Students at Maasai Mara University During 2012/2013 Academic Year

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Abstract

Advancement in technologies has led to the migration of print information to web in universities. Maasai Mara University (MMU) is investing highly on web-based information resource to meet the growing needs of their users and supplement their limited library print collection. Despite this effort, there has been low usage of academic websites by students. This paper seeks to determine range and form of academic websites accessed and used by MMU students. The paper used the survey research design to collect the views and opinions of respondents. The target population was 4,947 students in which a sample of 362 students participated in the study. Data was collected using questionnaires and participant-observation and analyzed using descriptive and hierarchical linear methods for quantitative and qualitative data respectively. Presentation of data used descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. The findings revealed that although the students visited varied academic websites including institutional, scholarly, research, educational and academic library websites, majority preferred scholarly websites. Study and learning, assignments and research were cited as main reasons for using academic websites. The findings established that relevancy of a site is the major determinant preference Maasai Mara University students choose when they access and use academic websites. The study concluded that Maasai Mara University students demonstrated a reasonably high level of awareness and use of academic websites. From the findings the study recommended that MMU library develops comprehensive continuous training programs that address information retrieval and literacy skills for its patrons on effective identification, selection, access and use of academic websites and that the university invest in more computer laboratories and high-speed internet bandwidth to ease access and use to academic websites.

Keywords: Academic websites, websites, web-based information resources, library

1. Introduction

Education is the driving force of economic and social development in any country (Cholin, 2005; Mehta and Kalra, 2006). Considering this, it is necessary to find ways to make education of good quality, accessible and affordable to all, using the latest technology available. Africa Higher Education Institutions have recognized and embraced the Web as a tool that enhances their academic programs. However, opportunities for realizing the benefits of using ICT in education face a number of challenges in the developing countries. Access to ICT facilities is a major challenge facing most African countries. According to Ajiboye (2007) the ratio to computer to students is a ratio of one computer to 150 students against the ratio of 1:15 students in the developed countries. In Kenya, the ratio for universities and colleges is 1:45 while access at the primary school level is much more limited at 1:250 (Ministry of Education, Kenya, 2006).

As stated by Bjerneborn (2004), since its birth in 1991, the Internet-based hypertext system, World Wide Web (WWW), has become a complex and very large repository of documents in the form of hyperlinked web pages. He argues that the Web is now known to be the richest source of information - and misinformation - ever known to man. As Miel and Faris (2008) states that every day more people turn to the Internet to read blogs, visit aggregators, watch video clips and open email links from friends. The web is powerful information source to users; be it novice or expert users.

Tang & Thelwall (2004) stated that website technology has bestowed diverse institutions, especially

educational, never-before capabilities that defy the constraints of time and distance. Many universities worldwide have developed various web-based environments (Collis and Moonen, 2001; Macchiusi and Trinidad, 2001; Harasim, 2000; Mason, 2000; Noble, 2001; Bennett and Bennett, 2003). Nielsen and Tahir (2002) record how links can transform a web site into a house in which every single window is also a door. Because universities work continuously towards the efficient use of resources, the Internet has been a boon to information seeking in higher education. As observed by O'Brien and Symons (2007), students' use of search engines reveals that the web is indeed the information tool of choice. Institutions of higher learning, and particularly universities, have embraced the WWW and its many features, enabling activities such as the: provision of online library catalogues; promotion of the existence and achievements of individuals, research groups, institutes and departments; and the dissemination of research findings, either through hosting online articles or publishing summaries, data sets or tools (Noruzi, 2005).

Academic websites have a rich source of information found on an individual or different institution through hyperlinks between sites. Academic websites are a medium for scholarly platform credit and publicity. It is a tool for marketing information resources and hosts institutional repositories, open access journals and published articles. Olsina (2002) argues apart from academic purposes, Academic institutions also advertise themselves to prospective students and clients, as well as staff and other interest groups. According to Nwagwu and Agarin (2008) the web is one of the available avenues open to the universities to provide information for purposes ranging from advertisement of their activities, admission processing, information dissemination to staff and students, teaching and research. Scholarly websites provide scholarly information for research and teaching purposes.

These academic websites may be limited to very short bibliographic citations of articles and conference papers but still many of the records have informative scraps from the full text for any users, and many also offer the abstracts of the articles for anyone. Academic library websites contain relevant resources and services for their students. Today's university students are familiar with the internet. According to the Digital Future Project "the highest levels of Internet use are for those age 24 and under, with among those under 18 approaching 100 percent. Universities in Kenya have set up well-designed and useful Websites (Mutula, 2001). Therefore, this paper seeks to ascertain the preferred types of academic websites accessed and used by students at MMU during 2012/2013 Academic Year.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey design as it was considered suitable for it provides accurate descriptive analysis of characteristics of the sample from the population (Mugenda, 2008). Similarly, this design was effective to this study because data was collected from a larger group of respondents involving description of the actual experiences, perceptions and attitudes of the respondents in the actual work environment. The design was expected to deepen the understanding of the effect of performance contracting on the performance of the employees from their own point of view (Kasomo, 2006).

2.2 Study population, study sample and sampling methodology

The population for this study involved 4,947 (Academic Year 2012/2013) students of Maasai Mara University. The study used stratified simple random sampling to select a sample of 362 respondents. The five schools formed the strata and random sampling was carried out within the strata to obtain the study sample. The response rate was 94% (341 questionnaires), 15 were discarded for incompleteness and 326 were coded and entered into the statistical package SPSS for analysis. The method of data collection entailed semi-structured questionnaire and observation checklist. Data was tabulated using frequencies and percentages.

3.0 Research Findings and Discussions

3.1 Types of Academic websites used by students at MMU

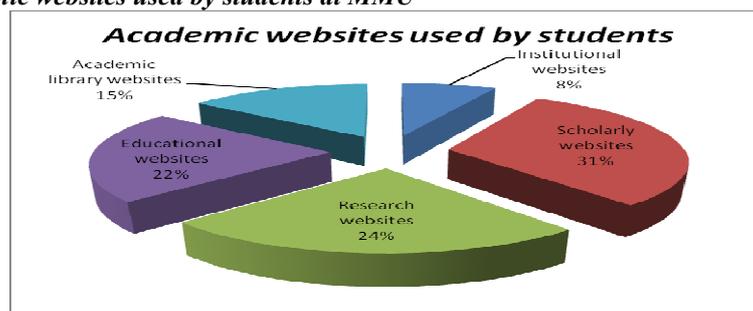


Figure 2: Academic Websites Used by Students at MMU

From the figure 1 above, majority of students visited scholarly website as represented by 31.0%. The rest of the students that is 24.5%, 22.1% and 15% visited research websites, educational websites and Academic Library Websites respectively, only 8% of the respondents visited the institutional websites.

According to this finding, it is apparent that students at MMU are informed of the different academic websites and use them for various reasons. Academic websites with research and educational information are important to MMU students. Scholarly websites are most used as majority of the students are trained on effective searching engines in library skills taught as a common course in their first year.

Students who visited academic library websites stated that there are very few universities with library websites, and these few library websites have scanty information on information services they offer. Stover and Zink (1996) compared the design of forty higher education library home pages to measure how well the libraries have incorporated emerging guidelines for Web page design and organization. The authors concluded that many of the home pages were badly designed and neglected fundamental principles of information organization. Institutional websites mission are not clearly defined, this finding is in line with Stover (1997), who stated that the mission of the organization impacts the content of any Web site.

3.2 Determinants for the site choice

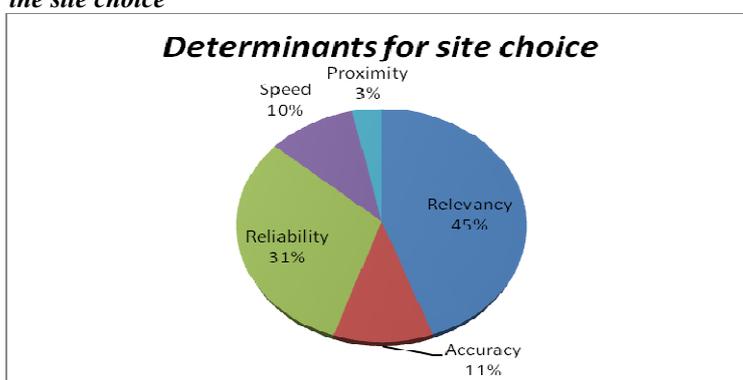


Figure 2: Determinants for Site Choice

The results presented in Figure 2 above, show that majority of the students that is, 44.5% choose relevance of the sites to be the key determinant for visiting. The remaining 31.3%, 10.7%, 10.1% respondents choose reliability, accuracy and speed respectively as the key determinants for visiting the preferred websites. Proximity was not concern to the respondents where only 3.4% of respondents choose it. This finding asserts that relevancy and reliability influence the access and use of websites. Cutrell and Guan (2007) further support this by stating that users tend to use the websites because of its current and prompt information.

3.3 Frequency of Use of Academic Websites by Students of MMU

Table 1: Frequency of Use of Academic Websites by Students of MMU

Academic websites visited	Frequency Institutional websites	Scholarly websites	Research websites	Educational websites	Academic library websites
Very often	28(8.0%)	107(32.8%)	86(26.4%)	93(28.5%)	48(14.7%)
Often	70(21.5%)	140(42.9%)	118(36.2%)	109(33.4%)	99(30.4%)
Less Often	186(57.1%)	89(27.3%)	91(27.9%)	58(17.8%)	132(40.5%)
Never	44(13.5%)	21(6.4%)	31(9.5%)	47(14.4%)	89(27.3%)

Frequency of Use of Academic Websites by Students of MMU

From Table 1, the most visited academic websites were scholarly websites. This was because of the reliability and satisfaction of their needs and expectations as students. Students use this site for study and assignments.

The researcher believes that the research websites were used by students for projects and these especially the fourth years and postgraduate students as represented by 86(26.4%) respondents that were surveyed in this study. Only 89(27.3%) respondents indicated that they never visited academic library websites as they are not aware of many academic library websites as very few Kenyan Universities have library websites. Despite the frequent use of scholarly websites, the students lacked information literacy skills.

3.4 MMU Students' purpose of use on academic websites

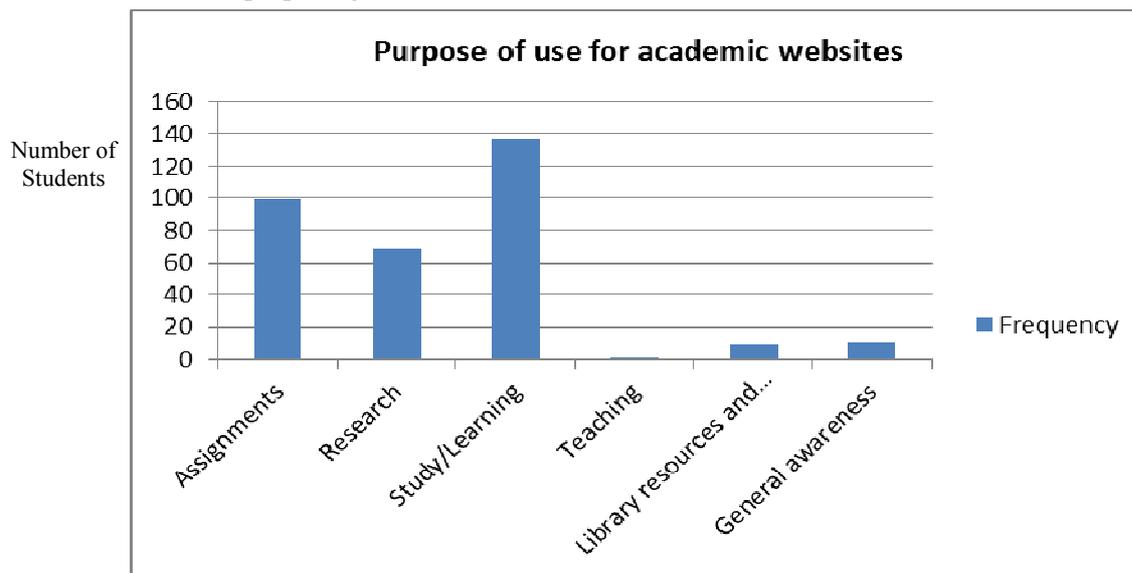


Figure 3: Students' purpose on academic websites

It is clear from Figure 3 above that students used academic websites mainly for their study/learning and assignments as represented by 139(42%) and 99 (30.4%) respectively. 69 (21.2%) respondents used academic website for research purposes.

Cutrell and Guan (2007) state that web users search for information has huge implications for both commercial and academic. Insignificant proportions made use of the academic websites for general awareness, library resources and services and teaching.

This paper indicates that student's purposes of use for academic websites are varied depending on their information needs. According to Cano et al (2009), websites are the most used resource to solve academic papers. Postgraduate student information need from an academic websites differs from undergraduate students, this is in line with Schimmel (2007), who stated that graduate students and undergraduates differ in online educational environments.

Conclusions

Maasai Mara University library has subscribed to an array of academic websites for academic use by students. These include the following: Research websites, scholarly websites, educational websites, institutional websites and academic library websites. However, according to the study findings, most of the students visited scholarly websites like Google Scholar, Research gate, JSTOR and Yahoo. This is because scholarly websites are reliable, easy to access and it has a broad research interface. Scholarly websites also, have current articles that that resonate with what their lecturers teach in class. Some of the lecturers also refer students to this particular site. The main reasons for students access to academic websites is for academic purpose that is, class assignments and general studies.

Generally, academic websites are not only a scholarly tool but also a social tool, as students visited these websites for entertainment, general awareness and communication. The study revealed that students' web information retrieval and use is transforming, and the library need to sensitize the university community on changing current trends on web technology.

Recommendations

The study established academic websites as a reliable source of information in academic institution and for effective and efficient access and use of academic websites one requires information literacy skills. It was therefore recommended that library users to be continuously trained by librarians on web information searching and retrieval skills.

The study further recommends that Maasai Mara University through the School of Information Sciences, to introduce a course on information literacy skills to be offered during the first year of student enrollment specifically taught by information professionals working in the library.

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