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# Student Engagement and Library Use: An Examination of Attitudes Towards Use of Libraries and Information amongst Undergraduate Students at a Turkish University Library

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# STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LIBRARY USE: AN EXAMINATION OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS USE OF LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION AMONGST UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A TURKISH UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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## Abstract

The competitive environment in which university libraries operate and provide their services and resources is one of the biggest challenges to engage today's undergraduate students. There is a limited amount of high quality attention and time students have, to be able to be engaged with what the library offers them. Planning and designing library awareness and information literacy programs, particularly for new students, has presented itself as an on-going challenge for librarians worldwide in recent times. However, the goalpost keeps on moving and the players are becoming more restless, demanding and seeking instant gratification. The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a study that examines undergraduate students' experience with research, library and information use prior to coming to university and their behaviour and attitude towards library and information after they have been exposed to a variety of library awareness activities and received information literacy training during their first year at Ozyegin University in Turkey. Students take a compulsory 'Introduction to University' subject during their first semester taught by both internal and external experts on a wide range of topics including 'Journey of Information' presented by library staff. The Library is also involved in the subsequent delivery of information literacy programs throughout students' university programs in an on-going effort to engage them and to get them involved in university-wide activities. The majority of new students spend up to a year undertaking intensive English preparatory classes. The curriculum for the ESL (English as a Second Language) program includes a learning portfolio linking various levels of English competency with each other (e.g. elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate etc.) to ensure students complete the program not only with sufficient English language competency but also with information and life skills to help them throughout their studies and beyond. The research will examine what impact the library's efforts to engage students in library and information use and their learning and research has had by understanding their pre-university experience, expectations and knowledge and skills about libraries and information use.

Keywords: student engagement; student learning; academic libraries; information literacy; Ozyegin University; OzU

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the role of the library in engaging undergraduate students in universities with particular reference to information literacy and other library awareness programs. Ozyegin University library experience, amongst first year undergraduate students is used as a case study to examine whether the library, its various awareness raising activities, information literacy program and collaborative learning activities with the School of English Language Instruction (SELI) made a difference to the overall student engagement, students' awareness of libraries, information resources, research and access to information. The paper will discuss Ozyegin University Library's information skills programs and various strategies used to engage students soon after their arrival at the university and throughout their studies as part of the library's overall strategy to enhance student experience at the university.

## **Background**

The competitive global environment amongst universities has created a paradigm shift in recent years to focus more on student engagement and to help students achieve their full potential whilst studying at the university. Student engagement has been considered as one of the most critical aspects of universities' strategic goals in order to retain their competitive edge and to demonstrate to their governing boards, government and accreditation agencies and other stakeholders that the university pays attention not only to research productivity, publications, grants and quality of teaching, but also focus on enhancing student experience, learning and graduate outcomes. An Australasian Survey of Student Engagement Research Briefing by the Australian Council of Research (ACER) states that 'All aspects of student engagement are positively related to students' overall satisfaction with university study. More engaged learners are more satisfied, and vice versa.' (ACER, 2008)

Universities in Australia, North America and the UK have been using a range of international, national and internal surveys to obtain information on student engagement for some time, e.g. Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) in Australia, National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK and National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in North America. These surveys often focus on the entire student experience and there may not be any questions directly related to library use or the impact of the library on student experience or engagement. Use of the NSSE data has been suggested by various writers, to link the impact of libraries, in particular information literacy on student engagement. Mark and Boruff-Jones claim that the NSSE survey 'provides a compelling, but underused, tool for measuring the extent to which information literacy is incorporated into the curriculum on a particular campus' (Mark & Boruff-Jones, 2003). Their proposal to correlate some of the NSSE question related to learning with ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education can be useful to help determine the state of information literacy on a particular campus, to benchmark one's institution against others and as a communication tool with the stakeholders about the information literacy programs.

A recent report commissioned by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) on the 'Value of Academic Libraries' (Oakleaf, 2010) recommends a number of strategies for libraries to adopt to demonstrate value and their contributions to achieve the overall goals of the parent institutions. One of these recommendations is use of 'self-report engagement studies' to investigate their contributions to student engagement and learning, in addition to use of national and institution-specific surveys to elicit information on student engagement. Some of the student engagement surveys contain library related questions from which it may be possible to infer the contribution made by libraries. These surveys tend to be limited by their reliance on indirect measures and self-reporting (Oakleaf, 2010)

Krause, in writing about the first year experience amongst undergraduate students in research-led universities in Australia, emphasises that institutions should make strategic use of the data collected from students to ensure that students are aware that their voice has been heard

(Krause, 2005). Libraries should be able to benefit from such institutional data to understand students' views, concerns, levels of engagement, attainment and factors affecting their involvement and engagement at the university. Student engagement in the university community during their first year has been recognised as a critical factor for their success. A number of research studies demonstrate that engaged students feel that they belong in the university community and are motivated to study and continue studying beyond the first year.

This new focus has created new opportunities and challenges for libraries when seeking and implementing different approaches to enhance their involvement in student engagement and learning. A more pro-active involvement in student engagement has the potential for libraries to demonstrate that they can have a recognizable impact on the mission and goals of the university through their contributions to student experience, engagement and learning.

### **Millennials: Attitudes towards use of libraries, information and learning**

In addition to the challenge of the globally competitive environment in which the parent institution of the library operates, libraries face a fundamental shift amongst the students in terms of their approach to information, research and use of technology. Most of the undergraduate and graduate students and an increasing number of faculty belong to the so-called Millennial Generation or Gen Y, born between 1978 and 1994. The majority of them have not experienced a world without computers or the Internet. The brothers and sisters of the present students, some refer to them as 'post-millennials' or 'the z generation' have also started appearing on university campuses. There is not sufficient research done yet about their characteristics, but they will probably be even more 'connected' 'technology savvy' and 'self-assured' than their older siblings. Millennials are often portrayed as confident, self-expressive, connected and open to change according to the Pew Research Report. The Report claims that the Millennials are 'history's first "always connected" generation. Steeped in digital technology and social media, they treat their multi-tasking hand-held gadgets almost like a body part – for better and worse. They embrace multiple modes of self-expression. Three quarters have created a profile on a social networking site. One-in-five have posted a video of themselves online.' (The Millennials, 2010)

According to the 2010 OCLC Perceptions of Libraries report, American college students overwhelmingly begin (83%) their information searches using search engines, though at lower rates than in 2005 (92%). Both the 2005 and 2010 OCLC surveys showed that no student surveyed started their research on the library website. However, it was interesting to note that information from library sources was seen as more trustworthy than from search engines according to an increasing number of college students (2010 – 43% and 2005 – 31%) (OCLC Perceptions of Libraries, 2010: Context and Community, 2011)

Krause (2005) claims that "The Y Generation of university students (in 2004) is less likely than the X Generation tail-enders (in 1994) to borrow books from the university library; photocopy journal articles and notes; be interested in extra-curricular activities at university; and spend time on the university campus." Krause made these claims in 2004 (Krause, 2005). It has been widely reported in many national and international reports that circulation and photocopying and printing statistics are plummeting, but the visitor numbers are increasing in many academic libraries, especially those with renovated and collaborative learning spaces, providing latest technology and generous opening hours. E-resource usage seems to be increasing as well, especially after the implementation of the new generation discovery search tools according to various reports.

However, the challenges academic librarians face when designing and offering information literacy programs to the millennials who are almost always connected to the Internet and to each other and who almost invariably start their search using search engines on Google cannot

be underestimated. The additional challenge is the students' perception of their own research skills, or self- assessment. Gross and Latham found the lower the skill the students had, the more they overestimated their skills. First year college students who participated in Gross and Latham's research stated that 'finding information is something that anyone can do and that the preferred methods are technological and personal, as the main sources of information are Internet searches and asking people. For those with below-proficient skills, this assumption reifies their sense that they are operating with higher than average abilities and that others (including teachers and librarians) have nothing to offer them in this area of their lives.' (Gross & Latham, 2011)

### **Impact on learning and information literacy**

A number of studies on information literacy assessment in recent years have been focusing on the relationship between information literacy and student engagement, student use of libraries, loan of books, use of e-resources and learning and attainment (Mark & Boruff-Jones, 2003); (Stone, Pattern, & Ramsden, 2011); (Wong & Webb, 2011); (Cox & Jantti, 2012). For the purposes of this study, we excluded literature on assessment of information literacy, instead focused on the relationship between impact, value and information literacy.

Gratch-Lindauer provides an excellent analysis of how the performance of academic libraries contributes to institutional goals and outcomes. (Gratch-Lindauer, 1998). The role of libraries and librarians in teaching-learning and directly affecting student learning outcomes has been discussed in the literature for over two decades. However, this role and its impact on institutional outcomes and value of the academic library to the university have taken on a renewed importance, mainly due to the increased focus on library's impact on student achievement, learning and research outcomes, i.e. what does the student and the faculty receive for their investment of time and energy. Cox and Jantti undertook a study using a tool they developed, "Library Cube", by creating a new dataset that joins library usage data with student data and attempt to demonstrate that the results of their study show a strong correlation between usage of library resources and student academic performance (Cox & Jantti, 2012). Stone et al on the other hand undertook a project to find a statistically significant correlation across a number of UK universities between library activity data and student attainment. This study is not conclusive yet and requires further data and analysis (Stone et al, 2011). Wong and Webb undertook an experimental project to investigate the correlation between students' GPA (grade point average) and their loan of books. They added use of electronic resources as an additional factor to their study later on. Their study claims to have established a positive correlation between book and multimedia loans and students' academic performance for most schools (Wong & Webb, 2011)

### **Turkey, education, libraries and Ozyegin University**

Turkish universities like others elsewhere have been experiencing a great deal of change, with increased emphasis on research and internationalisation due to globalisation of higher education and increasing collaboration with other universities, particularly through the European Union (EU), with some universities becoming part of the Bologna process and the Erasmus program. Increased emphasis on research measures related to research and other outputs, increased competition for better quality students, success with international accreditation and university rankings have helped some university libraries to collaborate with faculty and university administration in being actively involved in student engagement and learning.

In Turkey, there are 165 universities, 103 of which are state universities. The rest are funded by their own foundations and tuition fees and are supposed to be private, but not-for-profit. After a major shift in government policy to increase the number of universities across the country, there has been a 52% increase in the number of universities after 2006.

Ozyegin University (OzU) was established as a private, not-for-profit (foundation) university in Istanbul in 2008 with an initial cohort of 220 students. The university now offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs in business, engineering, law, aviation management and hotel management to over 2000 students operating on two campuses. OzU's academic programs are modelled on the North American system and instruction is in English. As it is a young and ambitious university, a newcomer to the Turkish university education system, OzU has high expectations to achieve outstanding results both in Turkey and internationally to attract and retain high quality students and to produce graduates who are in high demand both in Turkey and overseas. The University conducts an annual student engagement and satisfaction survey based on the North American NSSE survey to elicit information from students about their level of engagement and learning at the university.

### **Ozyegin University – information literacy, student engagement and learning**

Students whose English language skills are not sufficiently advanced must spend up to one year and sometimes more studying English language in an intensive mode prior to commencing their undergraduate degrees. School of English Language Instruction (SELI) at Ozyegin University has been developing a curriculum, including a learning portfolio linking various levels of English competency (e.g. elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate etc.) To ensure students complete the program not only with sufficient English language competency but also with life skills, including information literacy. The SELI instructors and library staff have been collaborating to integrate information literacy into the curriculum to ensure students achieve the required competencies and skills.

The integration process began in early 2008 when librarians attended classes and introduced library resources and research skills to all 1<sup>st</sup> year students undertaking English language instruction. As the number of students was relatively small at the time, it was possible to undertake follow-up assistance and support for individual students. As the student numbers grew, the curriculum for English instruction was further developed to incorporate learning portfolios appropriate for each level of English language competency. For the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 academic years, librarians in collaboration with the instructors began designing the content and delivery of information skills programs focused on specific needs of students with differing English language skills and modified the program as students moved from one level to the next to ensure the program was appropriate for their needs and requirements and suitable for their English language level.

In addition to the information literacy component integrated into the English language instruction, librarians were invited to contribute to the "*Introduction to University*" subject taught by both internal and external experts on a wide range of topics during the first semester for all new students starting in 2010. The main purpose of this subject is to create student engagement and introduce students to university life. Library staff present a lecture on 'The Journey of Information' covering lifecycle of news, social media, popular press, scholarly information, using and accessing different kinds of information as well as ethical use of information, including copyright and plagiarism. They use a number of case studies using small groups to illustrate the issues covered, such as authenticity of information, evaluation of information and application of information skills in day-to-day life.

Every year, collaboration between the SELI instructors and the library staff gets stronger, due to evidence of increased and improved student learning and engagement and use of the library's resources and services. Before the new academic year starts, the previous year's programs are reviewed to ensure content reflects the learning portfolio requirements. The way this program is run is unique to OzU in Turkey with its focused content on the requirements for each level of English language competency.

## **Methodology**

The methodology involved a survey of all first year students undertaking the first year English language program at the beginning of the second term 2012 (Spring term in Turkey). Students were asked to respond to a number of questions about their experiences in and perceptions of using libraries, information resources, research and a self-assessment of their competencies in accessing and using information to undertake research both before and after coming to OzU. The response rate was 57%.

The survey was designed to identify the following:

1. What kind of experience, if any, did the students have with libraries, information resources and research prior to coming to OzU?
2. What were the students' perceptions of libraries and information resources prior to coming to OzU and at the beginning of the second term at the University?
4. How did the students' rate their own competency in using information resources prior to coming to OzU and at the beginning of the second term at the University?

## **Findings**

Some of the most significant findings from the survey were:

1. 87% indicated that there was a library in the high school where they graduated from. It is important to be mindful of what students refer to as a library, as only 38% of the state schools in Turkey had a library according to 2009 figures on the Turkish Ministry of Education's web site. State schools often have a room with some books without a librarian. However, private schools tend to have more generous facilities, 72% of private high schools have a library, often with a librarian.(II. Ulusal Okul Kütüphanecileri Konferansı Sonuç Bildirgesi, 2009) Almost 50% of the OzU students come from private schools. Only 31% of the respondents said that they had been using the school library for their research and homework. 66% said that their school library had a librarian. However only 20% said they sought help from their school librarian for their research and homework. This may be because either the students did not consider they needed help or trust the librarian or the librarian did not offer research support.
2. In response to the question about what kind of resources they used whilst at high school, it is not surprising to find that the majority used the web for their research. In addition to the web, they also used their own personal library. See Table 1 and 2 for results.

Table 1: Types of resources used at high school

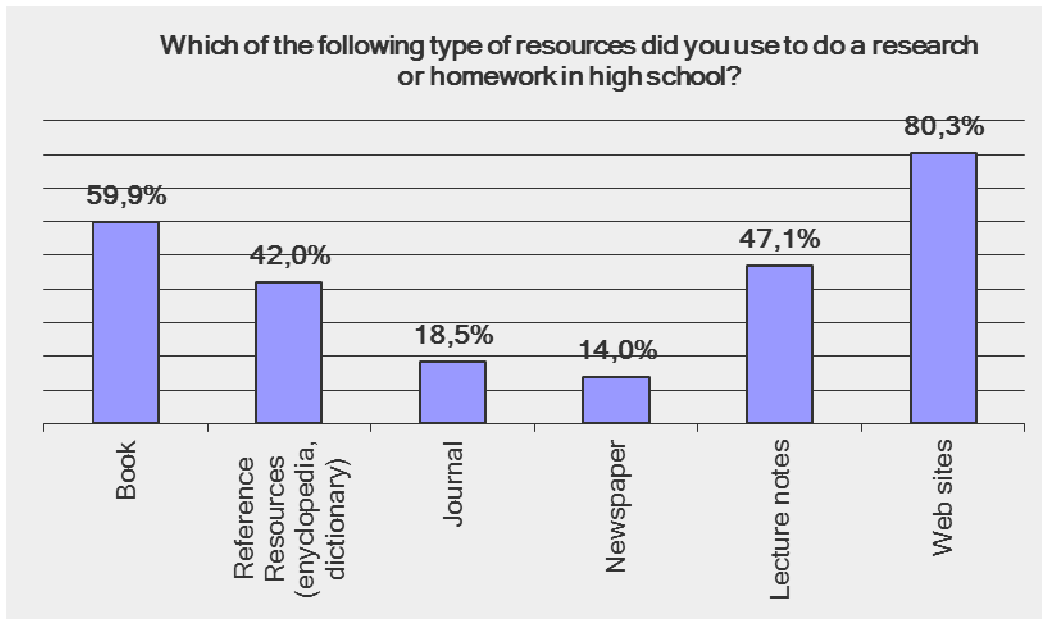
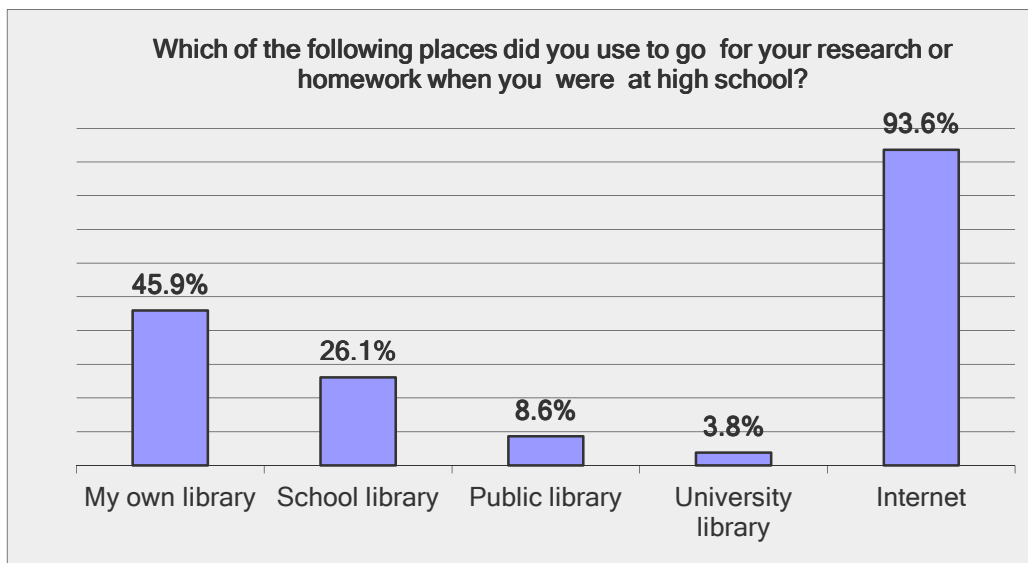


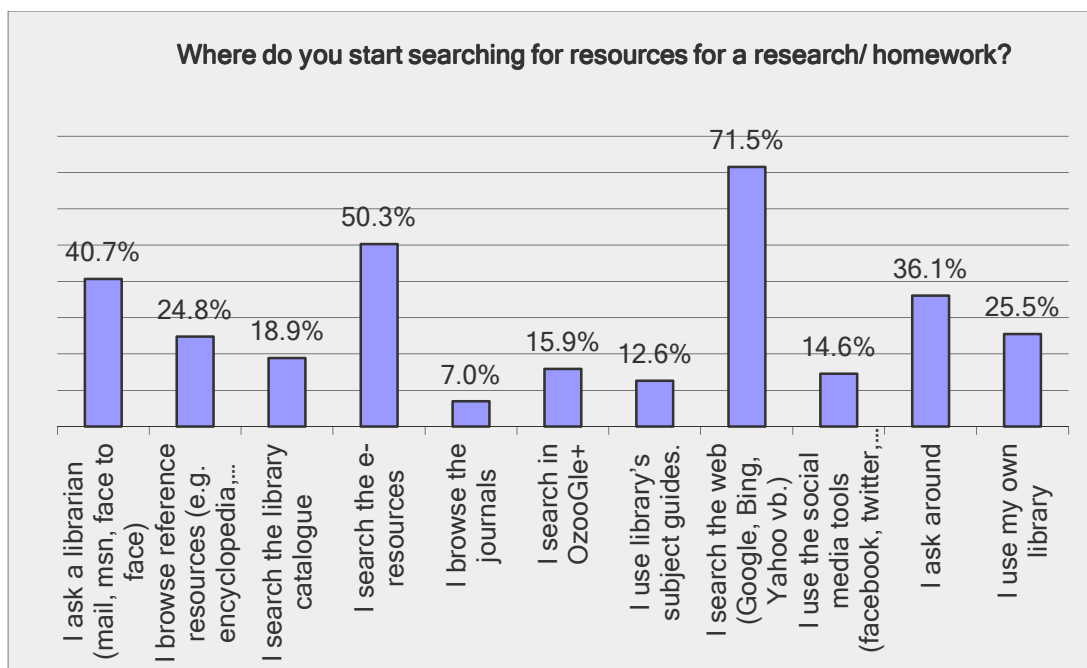
Table 2: Places where students went for research whilst at high school



3. In response to the question about starting point for research at the university, it appears that students still prefer the search engines. However, the following changes as shown in Table 3 are significant:
- a. Selection of resources
  - b. Increased use of e-resources
  - c. Appearance of the 'ask a librarian' option in their responses
  - d. Slight decline in selecting the web as the starting point for research compared to the figures whilst at high school (80.3% at high school and 71.5% at the university).
  - e. Transition from dependency on their own resources at the high school to the increase in usage of the university's resources.

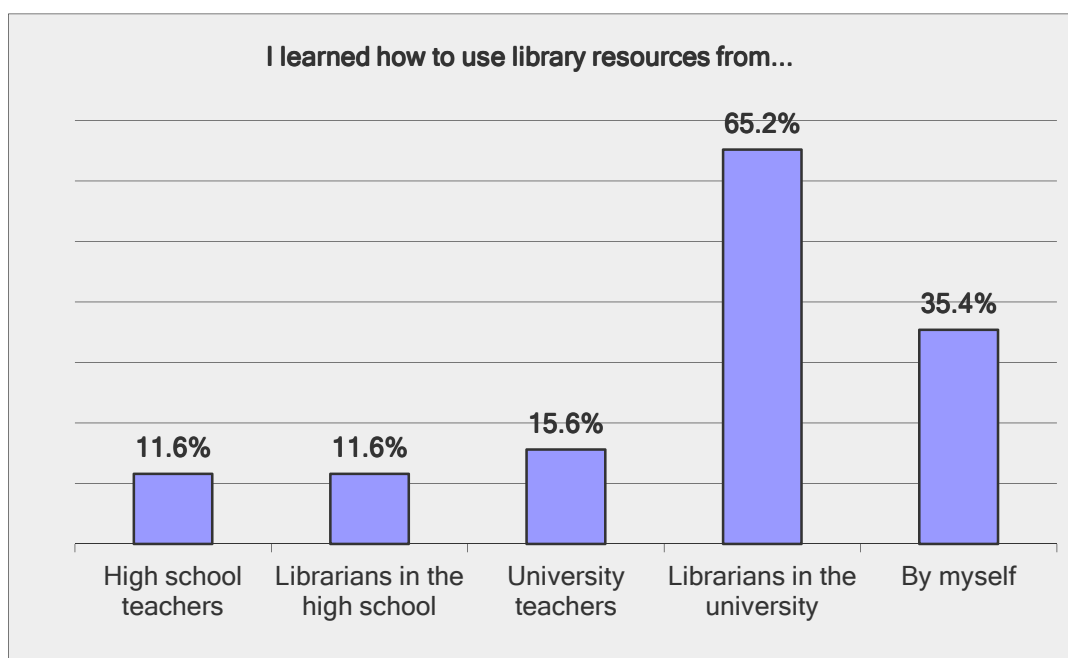


Table 3: Starting points for research at the university



4. In response to the question about where and how they learnt how to do research, 65.2% said they learnt these skills from the librarians at the university and 35.4% said by them. Increased awareness of the library resources and the librarians is again a significant change.

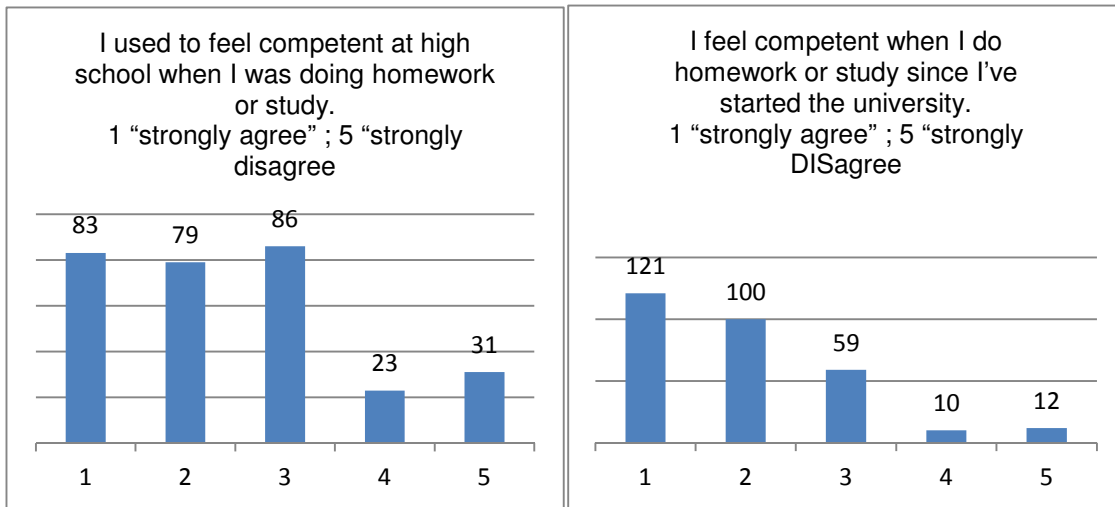
Table 4: People from whom students learnt how to use library resources



5. Students' self-assessment of their research skills: The majority of respondents said that they did not feel competent in high school when they were doing homework or study. They also claimed that they feel more competent when they do homework or study since coming to the

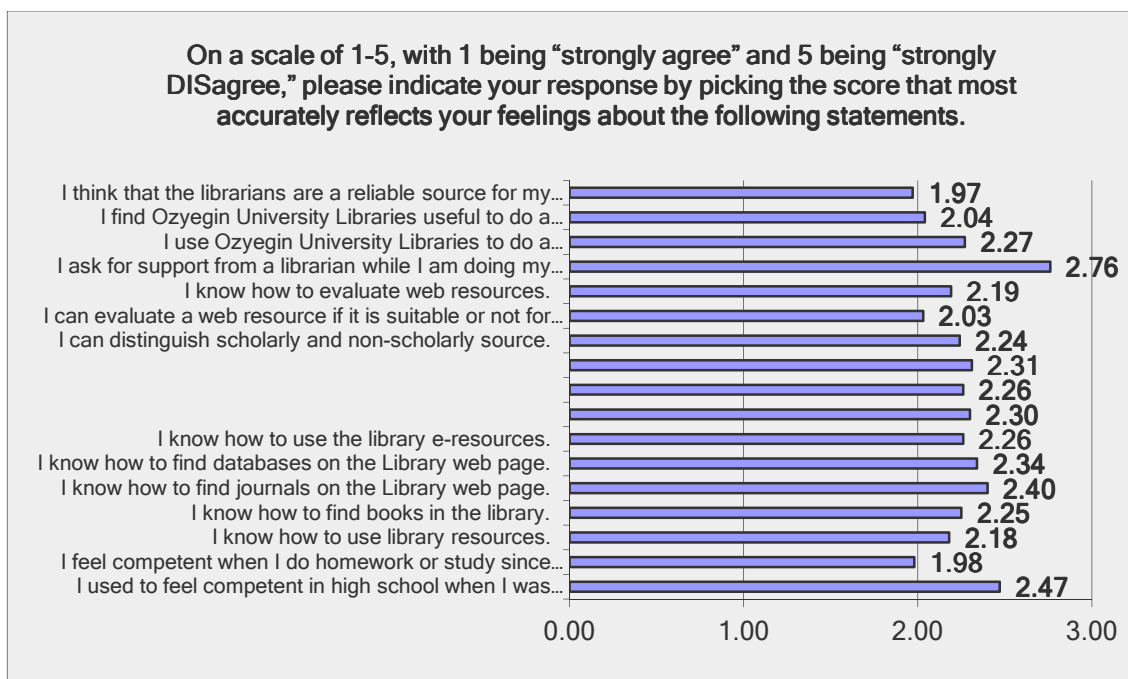
university. 73% of the respondents see the librarians as a reliable source for their research/homework at the university.

Table 5: Self-assessment of students' own competencies



In response to the questions about their research skills since coming to university 67% of the respondents claim that they know how to use the library resources; 63% claim that they know how to find the books in the library; 58% claim that they know how to find the journals on the library web page; 64% claim that they know how to use the library e-resources; 71% claim that they can evaluate a web resource if it is suitable or not for their research/homework; 66% claim that they know how to evaluate web resources; 63% claim that they use the OzU Libraries and 70% claim that they find OzU libraries useful to do a research/homework. As this is results of self-assessment, it will need to be followed up with an assessment instrument at a later stage to cross-check.

Table 6: Students' perceptions and self-assessment about research skills



6. The students provided a great deal of comments at the end of the survey. These comments refer to their past experiences with and perceptions of libraries and information resources, both at school and in general as well as their current needs, requirements, views and suggestions about OzU Library resources and services. Some students suggested that the library should provide additional training to teach students how to make the most of library resources.

‘I used to think that libraries were just spaces to study’, ‘I used to think they were boring and suffocating places’: Two of the comments from students in response to the question ‘What were your perceptions about libraries prior to coming to OzU?’

Most of the comments concerning students’ experiences about library use and research indicated that they were reliant on the Internet and their own personal library and books, rather than the school library. Many of the respondents also stated that they had no idea about e-resources before coming to university where they discovered e-resources and started using them for their research. The majority of the comments seem to indicate that the students benefited a great deal from various programs and activities provided to them to learn about the library, information resources and research. Those students whose schools had libraries stated that no one provided them guidance and support on accessing and using information resources whilst at school. It was also interesting to see comments from some of the students that ‘Internet is sufficient for their information needs’.

### Conclusion

This is largely a qualitative exploratory study. It will need to be followed up with other research, such as student satisfaction survey, focus group studies and further analysis of OzU’s Student Engagement and Satisfaction surveys over a number of years. This study does not include the results of students’ performance in their learning portfolios for information and research skills nor does it explore assessment of information skills programs.

The profile of the student population at OzU may be a contributing factor on how students develop information literacy skills. The schools where the students came from may be another determining factor. Considering 72% of schools in Turkey do not have a library (2009), students need to meet and understand the concept of a “library” culture first. Since 87% of the respondents said they had a library in their high schools, existence of a school library and/or exposure to school libraries cannot be the only factor for students’ motivation in becoming information literate. Not only collaboratively planned and implemented programs as part of the curriculum need to be in place to support this process, but also the entire student engagement and learning journey play a considerable role in the student experience lifecycle.

The findings of this study indicate that the programs offered by OzU Libraries made an impact on students’ perceptions of libraries and librarians, awareness of library resources for their research needs and their own competencies.

The results will be helpful for librarians in understanding students’ background, experience with libraries and information resources and provide some data when collaborating with the SELI instructors in further revision of the first year English language curriculum for the following academic year. The results of the survey will be used as input for a review of the existing information literacy program and library’s communication strategies with the students to enhance the program. They will also be used to communicate the library’s impact on student engagement and learning to the stakeholders, including the faculty involved in curriculum design and planning and the senior administration regarding the library’s contributions to the student experience. It will also be of additional value when reviewing and redesigning the annual Ozyegin Student Engagement and satisfaction survey which can in turn provide input to the design and delivery of the SELI curriculum and information literacy programs.

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