

# International Students and the Library: Problems, Preferences, and Proposed Solutions

Af Sibongile Sithe

**Studying in a foreign country is often an exciting and enriching opportunity for students, but it can also be a frustrating experience with adjustments to a new place, culture, and language.**

**Sibongile Sithe**  
Research Intern, Yale University 2011  
Praktikant, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, juni/juli 2009  
sibongile.sithe@yale.edu



As universities seek to raise their international standing and attract students and faculty from the world over, the university will need to show that it is both willing and able to sustain a diverse, intellectual, and technologically advanced academic population. The adjustment to International students can be a daunting one for university libraries, especially when they involve language barriers, new technologies, and various levels of familiarity with library systems.

In June 2009, in hopes of improving service to the International Student population, Copenhagen University Library and Information Services (CULIS) commissioned a comprehensive user survey of all university library facilities as experienced by its non-Danish speaking students. Through this survey, we at CULIS have learned about our strengths and weaknesses as an information provider, and we hope that the following research will be of service to other academic libraries as well.

Part one of the survey consisted of a survey designed to assess the library usage and information needs of International Students. A digital copy was emailed to the students (population 1437) through the International Office and paper copies were also available at the information desks of several branches. The survey was divided into 5 parts: Biographical Information, Previous Library Experience, Information Needs

and Use, Library Services, and a Your Thoughts free response section. Students who participated in the survey were entered into a drawing for cash prizes and gift certificates. Additionally, a short questionnaire was also sent to the International Office to ascertain the makeup of the International Student population at the University of Copenhagen and the office's relationship to CULIS. Part two of the survey was a comprehensive review of the CULIS website, and Part 3 was a review of the physical libraries in which six libraries were toured.<sup>1</sup>

## **Demographic Information and Previous Library Use**

According to data provided by the International Office, the top 10 countries of origin of foreign students are (in size order) France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Norway, Poland, England, the United States, Australia, and Canada. The 91 student survey respondents hailed from 29 countries, the largest proportions coming from Germany, Spain, France, Poland, and the United States. While the students spoke 24 different native languages, 76 percent did not speak Danish, but all were English speakers.

While 95 percent of the students surveyed reported using a library in their home country, 9 percent of them had not used a computer in a home library facility. Nearly 1/3 of the students

responded that they had not used an online catalog, digital databases, or eBooks before coming to the University of Copenhagen. When broken down by geographic region, the highest proportions of students with limited technological exposure were those from Eastern Europe, while those with the most exposure were from North America.

## **Information needs, Library Use and Library Services**

Although students praised the Library for its pleasant studying environment and the helpfulness of the librarians and staff, many still experienced difficulty within its doors. When asked what library services or facilities they found difficult to use or understand, the highest proportions noted printer / copier usage and database searches gave them the most difficulty, followed by requesting a book online. When asked how often they used a list of Library resources, many students reported that they "Never" used a number of them. Over forty percent reported that they never used online databases or eBooks, and 52 percent that they never utilize remote access to Library offerings. Although we expected to find a strong correlation between unfamiliarity with technology and the non-use of that technology, in the majority of cases, the students (Eastern European in particular) reported using the digital resources more than

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their tech-savvy counterparts from other parts of the world. The phenomenon was most prevalent in the Wet Faculties (Pharmaceutical Sciences, Life Sciences, Science, and Health Sciences), due, at least in part, to the high concentration of students from Eastern Europe in those Faculties. Whether or not students in the humanistic and social disciplines have a greater need for the online resources as compared to their science oriented counterparts remains to be uncovered.

From an alternate standpoint, it is also possible that the non-use stems from a lack of need, a lack of knowledge concerning their availability, or a lack of information on how to use them. In the free response sections of the survey, numerous students mentioned the difficulty of the Library's Danish-only instructions. From large portions of the CULIS website to copy machine instructions, the unavailability of signage in English makes the Library a difficult place to navigate for non-Danish speakers. And a lack of comprehensible information about one's surroundings can breed feelings of frustration, anxiety, and exclusion.

Nearly half of students surveyed had never read or never used the Library's printed training

materials to assist them in using library resources. Similarly, 42 percent of students surveyed said that they have never read or never used the library training material found on the Library's website. Furthermore, 43 percent of students have never attended a Library information session; and of those that have, nearly one-third report never using the information garnered from them. Across the board, however, students preferred to learn about their library's services and facilities online, however, the online preference was followed in a close second by in-person contact with library staff.

#### **CULIS Website Review - Discussion and Recommendations**

The two primary issues encountered were firstly, the lack of a comprehensive website in English, and secondly, the lack of resources needed by university students.

- **Welcome pages:** Not everyone who needs access to a university library (students or other visitors) will have a firm grasp of Danish or English, and so it is a mark of consideration and competence on the part of the university

library to provide a short introduction to its services in a variety of languages. Welcome pages in several languages introduce foreign users to the library in their native language and give them a brief overview of how the library works and the resources available to them.

- **Complete Website in English:** As noted earlier, 75 percent of the International students at the University of Copenhagen do not speak Danish. And because CULIS uses chronological shelving, students are unable to merely browse shelves in a particular section to collect needed materials. Without the cosmic intervention of the Fates, the online catalog is the only way for students to locate specific books, journals, and articles for their studies, and thus is critical to their academic success. A complete website in English is essential to providing equal educational opportunities to all students.
- **Library Guide / Online Tutorials:** Although the proportion may be small, for some students, electronically searching for books will be a completely new concept. And as libraries move towards increasingly digital resources,

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it's important not to leave users behind. A comprehensive guide to the library with information about library locations, collections, and staff, obtaining a library card, information on computers and networks, printers, and copiers, borrowing and lending rules, and the like will be valuable resource not only for International students, but for all university library users.

- **Student-oriented online resources:** As a university library website it's important to provide research resources important to university students. A homepage with practical quick links and resources like database tutorials, guides to bibliographies and citations, and a complete list of subject specialists can be very helpful to university students engaged in research.
- **Workshops and tours:** Tours and library workshops offered at the beginning of each semester introduce students to the physical Library. Tours should be brief as to keep students' attention, and should explain how to navigate the library's most popular services such as the online catalog, databases, ordering books, interlibrary loan, the shelving / catalog system, service points within the library, and where to go for help.
- **Signage:** From shelf labels to copy machine instructions to hand written notes by staff, all signs should be available in English. If the translation cannot be printed on the same page, signs should be hung side by side so that students know that they are receiving the exact same information. Whenever possible, glyphs (vector images) should be used

to convey the meaning information as well. Language barriers can leave students feeling frustrated, anxious, and embarrassed.

- **Assign a Librarian to International student programs and outreach:** Having a librarian who is familiar with the challenges of international students (student cards, university ID numbers, remote access, etc.) and whom they can contact will help to quickly resolve problems and prevent unnecessary frustration for all involved.
- **Identifiable librarians:** Although many students praised the staff, championing them as "very friendly," "extremely helpful," and even, "absolutely brilliant," several students noted that they were unsure who to ask for help or did not feel comfortable asking for assistance. While this could be the matter of shy students, it is important to remember that there are cultural differences at hand as well. As librarian Ann Curry writes, "[some] educational environments reward students for participation, questioning, and assertiveness in pursuit of independent research and original, creative work. In contrast...the students in other educational systems, such as those of Japan, China, and the Middle East, are usually verbally passive, as they learn by observation and imitation and may respond only to direct questions. These dissimilar learning styles may hinder communications between librarians and international students..."<sup>2</sup> Friendly, clearly identifiable librarians (some studies recommend the placement of "Can I help you?" signs on information and reference desks) will help many students feel more comfortable

requesting assistance. Additionally, a list of subject specialists will also help students direct their academic questions toward someone with a specific knowledge of their fields.

- **Establish a partnership with the International Office:** Collaborations with offices for International students can help in promoting library tours and workshops during orientation week and the beginning of the semester, keeping abreast of demographic shifts, and, in general, gaining further insight to International student life and needs.

### Conclusion

Although International students present a unique set of challenges for university libraries, in actuality, the accommodation process is simply one of making the library workings more transparent. Many of the changes university libraries can implement to better serve foreign students will also help users native to the country as well.

### Noter

<sup>1</sup> Caveat: The survey was conducted during June of 2009 at the close of the spring semester, and thus at a time when many students were taking exams and returning to their home countries. Unfortunately, with an International student population of 1437, and a sample size of 91, some of the data presented may not be statistically significant.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Curry and Deborah Copeman. "Reference Service to International Students: A Field Stimulation Research Study," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, no. 5 (2005), [www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov) (accessed June 20, 2009).

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