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# Post-graduate students and learning environments: Users' perceptions regarding the choice of information sources

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## KEYWORDS

Information;  
Libraries;  
Internet;  
Learning environment;  
Knowledge;  
Higher education

## Summary

The purpose of this paper is to investigate, through empirical analysis, whether or not post-graduate students choose information technology or other information sources such as home institution libraries for the purposes of learning, expanding their knowledge and/or completing their studies. A survey was conducted to gather primary source data for the paper. Questionnaires were administered to 211 education post-graduate students. Results showed that Greek post-graduate students from different fields of study chose the Internet as their primary information source for a number of reasons but mainly: for the provision of creditable and up-to-date information, for easy access to information at home, for the time of day they can access the material and for fast information retrieval. Although the Greek post-graduate students believed the Greek information network to be satisfactory up to a degree, this paper identifies that greater access to Internet resources, training programs providing students with tools to effectively use the network's resources and more online databases, combined with a historical and statistical database of libraries' online catalogs are key issues in improving both information source performance and the link between strategy and implementation.

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## Introduction

According to the system approach, organizations are complex social systems, involving a number of interrelated variables and functioning within a larger dynamic environment. This approach views organizations both as a complete

system and as a part of a larger environment. Since the organization is continually in dynamic interaction with both its internal and external environment, the cooperation between these different system components—which face a variety of challenges—is of crucial importance to obtain the best results in key areas of organizational activity.

In the educational context, academic institutions, such as universities, are organizations and hence complex social systems which form part of a larger open environment and consist of interrelated sub-systems. Among the main elements (sub-systems) of a university (an open system)

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are students, university professors, buildings, infrastructure, learning environments, software, project management, material substructure, etc.

Learning environments and the use of information sources are crucial among the factors that determine the optimal effectiveness of education performance as a system, since, when these requirements have been met, a balance among the various influential parts (sub-systems) is secured. Education systems, by spreading knowledge through the use of the available sources, ensure that they satisfactorily meet or exceed the demands and requirements of the labor market, and are adaptable to changes of specific requirements in the external environment and the demands of the situation.

The concept of a learning environment is significant for the successful functioning and survival of a learning organization, and in the absence of it an organization will collapse. It is impossible at present for learning organizations to function without appropriate learning environments since the optimal effectiveness of organizational performance is contingent on its continuous use of and growth in knowledge.

Various definitions of a learning environment can be found in literature. However, many researchers agree on its constructivist characteristics (Halttunen, 2003; Resnick, 1989; Wilson, 1996). Learning environments are places in which individuals transform information and become the bearers of the values, attitudes and beliefs held to be important by society and by the institutions in which they find expression. A learning environment serves at least one main purpose: the acquisition of the skills necessary to find any information required for students' studies. These environments precondition the cooperation of students (learners) by using a variety of tools and information sources so as to achieve their learning aims and knowledge development (Wilson, 1996).

Academic libraries<sup>1</sup> serve as a learning environment to students, faculty and staff by providing information and loaning printed and non-printed material in an effort to promote and support learning, teaching and research. The emergence of technology in education in recent years has given students the chance to learn and develop their knowledge more quickly and easily, and ultimately to use technology in every aspect of their academic studies. The use of information technology in the learning process may be an effective means of ensuring that participants receive an efficient and viable education.

In order to function efficiently, academic libraries should have a flexible and efficient lending system, good cooperation with other academic libraries, and easy access for students to approach both the printed and non-printed material. The current and future application of the Internet within and for the libraries expands the services of the academic libraries, eliminates physical distance, and supports learners with information skills (Chao, 2002;

Tenopir, 2003). Currently, with the implementation of the Web in the academic libraries of most of the universities all over the world, locating information sources provides no barriers for students who cannot afford to leave home or their post in a job or those for whom the classes are not available at a convenient hour (Saitis & Saiti, 2004). Since the use of information technology provides post-graduate students with benefits such as the expansion of their knowledge and the receiving of quality job-related and self-improving education without loss of time, it creates new opportunities in education for post-graduate students and prospective post-graduate students.

Taking into consideration that universities are learning organizations and that knowledge and information are the benchmarks of an educational system, the development of sophisticated learning environments becomes key for the successful functioning and survival of higher education. Indeed, most learners, and post-graduate students in particular, do turn to information sources that are convenient to approach. However, while students' perceptions on the use of technology are generally positive, there is still a slight preference for the use of traditional information sources. Thus, a question arises as to whether or not post-graduate students choose information technology or other information sources such as home institution libraries for the purposes of learning, expanding their knowledge and/or completing their studies.

## The purpose of the paper

A number of researchers (Burton & Chadwick, 2000; Cader, Debryshire, Smith, Gannon-Leary, & Walton, 2006; Friedlander, 2002; Gannon-Leary, Walton, Cader, Derbyshire, & Smith, 2006; Graham & Metaxas, 2003; Liu, 2004; Liu & Huang, 2005; Metzger, Flanagan, & Zwarun, 2003; Tenopir, 2003; etc.) have conducted studies to investigate the type, nature and range of information sources and explored the reasons why students choose these information sources for their educational needs. Many have found that the majority of students have chosen Web-based information sources such as Cader et al. (2006), Gannon-Leary et al. (2006), Graham and Metaxas (2003), Liu (2004), Liu and Huang (2005), Metzger et al. (2003) and Tenopir (2003) while others, such as Friedlander (2002) and Burton and Chadwick (2000), have found that students use a combination of information sources for their research. The majority of the studies indicated that students used the Internet as their main information source, prompting further investigations into the credibility and accuracy of information on the Internet and the abilities of students to act as critical users. The findings concluded that students considered the information provided on the Internet to be of low quality. The findings indicated that the speed, the volume and the ease of access to information on the Internet outweighed many students' concerns regarding the quality of the information provided.

Up to now, the literature on the use of Greek information sources in higher education has not discussed the matter in any great detail, instead focusing mainly on general aspects of a particular type of library, including any changes and developments they may have experienced. Furthermore,

<sup>1</sup>In the Greek context, the term "academic libraries" refers to both University libraries and Technological Institution libraries. Given that (a) in Greece the post-graduate programs are provided solely by the Universities and (b) there, research is largely geared towards post-graduate students and their choice of information sources, for the purpose of this study the term "academic libraries" shall refer to university libraries.

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