1. INTRODUCTION

The growth and development of academic library system in India has its own history as the academic libraries have come of age in the present times, particularly with the introduction of computers for housekeeping operations as well as for providing various types of reference and information services to enhance the information use among their clientele. There are various types of academic libraries working in the present academic environment. These range from school to college to university libraries, and each one of them has further sub categories such as middle school libraries, high school libraries, secondary school libraries, and so for the college and university libraries. All these types and sub types have different information needs and the information use also varies according to their changing requirements.

2. USERS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Library and information users are not restricted to any one type these days; they are rather numerous who come visiting the academic libraries for a variety of purposes. The academic library system provides the requisite information needed at a given time, and also other information based services to their users, the
last link in the information chain, that libraries and their services are attached importance and value by the seekers of information. The information obtained from the library is put to a variety of uses by the users to gain new knowledge and thereby extend the horizons of subject knowledge through research.

2.1. Library User: Definition

A user is an important component in a library and information system along with documents and library staff. Right information to the right user at the right time in right format is regarded as highly essential as the philosophy of librarianship. But it has been observed that the user has usually been neglected and removed at the margins by none other than the service providers, the librarians. The librarians have always focused more on the other elements (document acquisition, its processing, etc) other than the user, the nerve centre of the academic library.

One of the major goals of an academic library is to provide pin-pointed, exhaustive and expeditious information to users. In order to achieve this goal the library Establishes a purposive contact between the user and the information embodied in the variety of documents acquired carefully in an academic library.

In the communication of information cycle in an academic library, users are generally placed as the last link or the last recipient of the information. Probably this is why they are usually described as the end users of information.

S. R. Ranganathan would have still loved to call a user as a ‘Reader’ in the context of a library who would visit the premises of library for reading books, journals, and other literature of his/her interest. The term ‘Reader’ had been extensively used in library literature since Ranganathan introduced it, but has now been replaced with probably a more comprehensive term ‘User’.

There are a number of terms used as synonyms or near synonyms to ‘User’. These include such terms as patron, client, customer, reader, member, etc (some of them seem to have been borrowed from the field of Business Management). However, ‘user’ is still considered as the preferred one of all these terms.

According to Kenneth Whittaker, a user may be defined as a person who uses one or more library’s services at least once a year.

A user can be called a person who needs information which can be provided by specific library services.

A user is also one who is known to have the intention of using certain information services from the library.

Similarly, a user is also one who derives a measurable advantage from information services.

It could be further observed that a user is a person who visits a library for one or more of the following purposes:

i. to browse through a collection of the latest arrivals in the library, current journals, and similar other documents;

ii. to seek a particular document for consultation or study in the library or borrow the same;

iii. to obtain the current references on a specific topic or bibliography of references over a period;
iv. to obtain factual information on a topic, event, activity, etc., through reference sources;
v. to obtain a photocopy of a journal article, a conference paper or a technical report; and so on.

2.2. Characteristics of Users

Some of the characteristics of a library user, at an individual level, may be listed but these may not necessarily relate to the information seeking behaviour of that user.

1. **Age**: It is one such characteristic that could explain the reading ability or use of information by a user or a user group.
2. **Personality**: This is another important characteristic of a user determining his/her reading ability or use of information.
3. **Motivation**: It also determines the information seeking and use as to how much a user is motivated to put the information to a better purpose.

2.3. Types of Users in an Academic Library

The basic purpose of visiting a library, irrespective of its type, remains by and large the same, yet the users of one type of library are different from those of another. The users of an academic library are, therefore, different from other user groups, say in a public library or a special library. However, academic libraries usually have a homogeneous group of users.

2.3.1. There are many ways of grouping library users. Ranganatha has grouped user community on the basis of various types of services enunciated by him. These groups include the following:

1. **The Fresher**: The fresher, or the freshman, is the new member of the library. He/she should be initiated to the library and introduced to the world of books, and how to find them depending upon his/her reading interests.
2. **Ordinary Reader**: He/she is an ordinary person with demand for ordinary books, and ordinary services from the library.
3. **Specialist Reader**: A specialist user is one who specializes in a narrow field of a subject. His demand for books will also be specific and research oriented.
4. **General Reader**: This is an assorted group of users which is not included in any of the above user groups.

In order to satisfy these four groups, Ranganathan has suggested four types of services to be provided to them. These include (i) Initiation or Orientation, (ii) Ready Reference or Short Range Reference Services, (iii) Long Range Reference Services, and (iv) General Help to General Users respectively.

2.3.2. There is another classification of library users suggested by Whittaker. He has divided user community on the basis of library services they generally make use of. It is as follows:

1. **General Readers**: This type of users generally concentrates on the use of light reading materials available in the library.
2. **Subject Readers**: This type of users generally concentrates on their use of library materials on a subject field of their interest.
3. **Special Readers:** The users placed in this group are those having special information needs needing some special library services, for example there may be some readers with physical and/or visual disabilities in academic libraries.

4. **Non-Reading Users:** These are made up of sub-groups who make use of library materials, but not reading materials. A user, for instance, coming into the library just to borrow a video is an example of non-reading user.

2.3.3. There is yet another classification of library users as suggested by Werner Kunz et al, on the basis of their approach to information in libraries. This is as given below:

1. **Potential User:** It is the one who needs information but may not be able to express herself/himself properly, hence it can be provided by specific library services oriented to her/him.

2. **Expected User:** It is the one who is known to have the intention of using certain information services.

3. **Actual User:** It is the one who has actually used an information service regardless of whether he/she has derived any advantage from it or not.

4. **Beneficiary User:** It is the one who derives a measurable advantage from the information services provided by the library.

2.3.4. However, besides the above given categorization of library users, the academic library also has the following types of users visiting its premises regularly, and seek more demanding information services.

1. **Students:** They constitute the largest number of academic library users, be it a school or college or a university library. In the case of a university or an institute of higher learning, the student community comprises of post-graduate and M. Phil. Students as well as research scholars. Most of them usually seek access to text books as suggested by teachers or recommended in their curricula. They can also have access to some advanced books on their subject of interest. Besides, once in the library, they can also read general knowledge books, reference sources, and other literature which may enhance their reading interests such as fiction books or biographical accounts, etc. The goal of an academic library rests in preparing the students for the knowledge-based society facing new challenges.

2. **Teachers:** This is another very important type of academic library users. They constitute the second largest group in terms of numbers to be expected in the library. As teachers, like students, are concerned with education, they may be interested in imparting values, attitudes, embodying knowledge, judgement, understanding and wisdom. Thus they need almost every type of information that concerns educational and research pursuits. They are also engaged in research activities in order to contribute new knowledge to the existing body of literature on the subject of their interest, hence require micro level information from the library. This will help create a vibrant community of teachers with intellectual freedom and optimist on the university campus.

3. **Research Scholars:** These are those users who have crossed the formal student life of education and after earning post-graduate degrees in their respective subjects, are now pursing research to make some new contribution to extend the boundaries of knowledge in a particular subject. They
would test the available information and knowledge on a given subject, verify, and if found valid, would formalize the same for further research. Research scholars, in their pursuit of new knowledge would require a variety of scientific, social, political, cultural, linguistic, etc information. Academic libraries may monitor these developments and prepare themselves to meet the practical challenges arising from them.

4. Administrative Staff: They are the supporting staff working for the academic institution. Their number is quite large in a university environment, but not as large in a school or a college set up. They usually carry out the jobs which are usually done in any office of an institution. Those who prefer to visit the library of their institution may be looking for some light reading such as fiction, biographies, local history, inspirational readings, informational material, and so on. Some of them, who intend to improve their educational qualifications, may also look for some kind of textbooks to help them learn more about the subject of their study. Further, some of the administrative staff members may prefer to improve their competencies and skills in a particular trade and find useful information for the purpose.

5. Management Committee Members: These are other stakeholders in the library of their institution. They are required to solve various problems and take appropriate decisions in the interest of the institution. They take decisions at different levels hence require information from the library considered useful from every point of view.

3. INFORMATION USE IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

We have been passing through a phase of information explosion caused by various factors. It has led to phenomenal increase in the production of literature not only in science and technology but in social sciences and humanities as well. But the nature and characteristics of information are such that it is regarded as an important and valuable national resource. As a result new tools and techniques have been developed for information storage, retrieval and dissemination so that it could be used to the advantage of the users.

Information has always been the product of different human activities and events undertaken by individuals and/or by organizations to achieve specific objectives. Information is generated through a number of communication channels, predominantly through printed media, viz., books and periodicals; mass media, such as newspapers, radio, television, cinema, etc. With regard to the printed media, the world presently is living in a state of what is usually termed as “information explosion”. This is why this era is also called as the ‘Information Age’. Similarly, the flow of documentary information from the authors, creators, and senders of information to the various segments of users and receivers makes use of many channels and media, and some of them are already mentioned as communication channels which help in disseminating information to the end users.

3.1. Types of Information

There are various types and forms of information recognized on the basis of different characteristics and nature of use and purposes for which it is used. For example, J. H. Shera has categorized information into the following types:

i. Conceptual information
ii. Empirical information
iii. Procedural information  
iv. Stimulatory information  
v. Policy information  
vi. Directive information

There are also other ways of categorizing information, for example:

i. Statistical information  
ii. Descriptive information  
iii. Interpretative information, etc.

3.2. Use of Information

Information being a valuable resource and precious asset, its value can be ascertained only on the basis of its use by the needy users. The use of information is made by the various categories of users as identified in the earlier Section above.

An academic library being a facilitator of information, documentary information is acquired to provide to its users. The basic philosophy of library and information science is to provide right information to the right user at the right time at the right place and in the right format so that the tasks and/or projects at hand are completed successfully.

There are many ways in which the use of information obtained from an academic library is made by the user community. The information requirements of the users largely depend upon at least two factors, namely:

i. the subject or the topic on which information is required, and  
ii. the purpose for which the information is being sought.

It means that the information, and thereby knowledge, got by the users is an instrumentality rather than an end in itself. Such a use of information, therefore, is a part of a larger process, and the demands of the overall process would condition the use of information.

Information obtained from different sources is believed to have been put to one major use, i.e., assistance in problem solving. Academic library users have different types of problems, such as pertaining to subject/s being taught, projects being researched upon, technical, etc. These problems may require different types of information from the library system.

In order to promote the information use, it is imperative to ascertain the information needs of all categories of users. It is all the more important to know what their needs are in this information age where literature/information growth and other factors have made the needs varied and multi-dimensional.

Margaret Egan and Herman Henkle, long ago, pointed out that investigation of the use of recorded knowledge in terms of the individual and his characteristics ignored the fact that in any practical situation such use depends less upon the individual’s tastes, abilities, and habits than upon the “role” he plays in
the given situation. Therefore, they suggested the need for “situational analysis”, to be initiated by assembling like situations into broad classes derived from empirical observations.

The pattern of thought that emerges out of such “situational analysis” needs to be well analyzed. The starting point of knowing about the information use by users should be the needs of groups of users which can be isolated and described in terms of regularly repeated intellectual activities. If a need serves as the given factor, then the ‘what’, the ‘why’, and the ‘how’ of information processing should vary with need for information. So the information use and user needs both are directly concerned with users of information.

In other words, it can be restated that apart from a general acquaintance with the goal of the institution, the essential step in assessing the information requirements is to obtain a fairly detailed account of the various research projects undertaken by the institution (say, university or college), and the tasks of the individual faculty members associated with each of these projects. This will not only facilitate the acquisition of documents (primarily in terms of the subjects) relevant to the research projects, but will also be helpful in satisfying the specific needs of faculty involved in the projects.

**3.3. Information Seeking Behaviour**

The typical information seeking behaviour of the majority of faculty members and researchers may be stated as follows:

i. what is happening currently in the area/s of their concern
ii. who else is working in the field and where they are
iii. introductory and background information while undertaking work in a new field
iv. the extent of prior work done in the new field
v. want to get specific piece/s of information and data needed at different stages of their research/work.

The specific nature of information requirements of individual faculty members and researchers can be ascertained by developing “user profile” for each one of them. The academic library in a university set up and in a college may conduct user surveys for the development of “user profiles”, which cover both the dimensions of information requirements, viz., the subject content and the information seeking behaviour of the faculty members.

But the information seeking behaviour of the other categories of users such as the students at post graduate level and /or those engaged in research activities are different from those of the faculty members. The faculty may require information/ literature for various research projects being undertaken by them as well as for preparation of lectures. The students, on the other hand, may be needing information/ literature relevant to the programmes of study and other reading material useful to the students. However, all of them may also require literature for group discussions, practical exercises, tutorials, and so on. Therefore, the assessment of their information requirements may be using the following sources:

i. the statement of the objectives of the institution
ii. the calendar of the teaching programmes and the details of the teaching contents
iii. the research and consultancy programmes
it would, therefore, be helpful involving the library with the curricula designing process, particularly with respect to the collection development as well as for planning appropriate information services.

3.4. Problems in Information Use

In the present era of Information Age the users of information are beset with several problems in their search for information they require on topics/subjects of their interest. T.K.S. Iyengar and G.S. Raghavendra Rao have identified some of these problems as follows:

i. The vast quantity of information gathered as well as pouring into the system every day which have their own ways of presentation;

ii. Increasing uncertainty of problems in expression of users information needs;

iii. The mechanics of matching information need with information sources have been increasingly made efficient; such mechanics are sophisticated and complex;

iv. There is therefore a need for training users of information with respect to the ways in which information needs are expressed; new methods of searching and manipulating with the mechanics of information retrieval; and

v. The modern concepts of user friendliness, user assistance and user education have developed several devices and courses to inculcate in the regular information seekers a methodology for productive approach for information gathering and self education.

4. USER NEEDS AND INFORMATION USE

As a result of these problems the users’ interests regarding information use also get impacted. The use of information further varies because of the following user characteristics:

i. User behaviour

ii. User attitude

iii. User capabilities

iv. Communication attitudes

v. User habits, etc.

In order to understand the user behaviour towards information use, the librarian or other information professionals must understand the nature of user needs. It is important to know about the intended use of information or the intentions about the way the users are likely to use the documents or information contained in them.

It means that the psychology of the users plays significant role in determining their behaviour to information use. The librarian and other information professionals in academic libraries, therefore, must analyze and identify those aspects of users which have relation in some way to the information flow from the authors, creators, etc to the publishers, to the published documents/information, to the libraries, and to the users. The degree or extent of information use is subject to intended use and other priorities of the users.
There could probably be yet another dimension to information use. It is the ‘purpose’ for which the information obtained from the academic library (particularly college and university libraries) is being put to use. The ‘purpose’ here could be research purpose, planning, education, teaching, and so on. But such purposes may not be constant for all the times and are likely to change from time to time and situation to situation. In every case users want qualitative and not quantitative information from the library system. For many users quality and accessibility to information can be treated as fixed which actually it is not because it goes on changing; and users do not react to such changes.

In some situations, a user may not be aware of her/his information needs at a given time of visit to an academic library. In such cases information use can occur without a demand being expressed by the user. The librarian also, therefore, cannot know exactly what is required by the users. Again, there is a range of possibilities in responding to their information related queries.

In order to assess the information use behaviour, the perception and cognition of the users are of particular relevance here. The quality, utility, relevance, and accessibility to information can be measured only as perceived by the individual user who sometime is not quite clear about it.

**4.1. Types of Information Needs**

Information needs refer to individual needs of users regarding information which vary according to their subject requirements, but should be satisfied by the specific information needed by them. Broadly speaking, there could possibly be two types of information needs:

i. One relates to current awareness type of information which the users require in their respective fields of specialization or study interest.

ii. The other is ad hoc need information which is required to satisfy a specific purpose.

On the other hand, B. Guha has identified four types of information needs with as many approaches. These are as follows:

1. **Current approach**, in which users require current information to keep themselves abreast of the nascent developments in the field of their specialization/interest.

2. **Everyday approach**, in which users seek some specific piece of information, say, in the form of facts required in the day to day investigation.

3. **Exhaustive approach**, in which information is sought when a user/researcher wants to have a comprehensive detailed information about a specific topic on the field of study.

4. **Catching up or brushing up approach**, in which a user requires information pertaining to related subject fields to catch up with the latest developments in the subject in which he/she is not an expert.

**4.2. Factors Influencing Information Needs**

Information needs of a user depend upon a number of factors such as activity, discipline, and availability of facilities in the library system and outside it. Many years ago, J. M. Paisley observed that the following factors influence the information needs of most of the users:

i. The range of information sources available;
ii. The use in which the information be put;
iii. The background, motivation, professional orientation, and other individual characteristics of the user;
iv. The social, political and economic system surrounding the user; and
v. The consequences of information use.

5. LIBRARY SYSTEM AND USERS

These days, usually each user is a member of many library and information systems. In college and university libraries, particularly faculty members and research workers do not restrict their membership to one library. Their multi-library membership may influence in some way or the other, their information seeking and gathering behaviour. But the cardinal question is that almost all library and information systems are designed and built without taking the user much into consideration. This has been happening despite the fact that Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science revolve around the user, and advocate to build a library system keeping in mind the user’s information and service requirements.

Before planning and designing the academic library system the college/university authority, designer, librarian, and the architect as the team members should take the user needs and requirements into consideration. On the contrary, the experience shows that the building team as well as the library and information professionals have been attempting ever since to mould the user to fit into the system they have designed. It has been observed that the designers of library systems hardly feel concerned to study the actual and potential users’ needs before planning and designing the library and information services. The users, by and large, remain neglected and marginalized while designing and monitoring the library and information services.

But if the library and information professionals, with their experience of daily contact with library users, provide informed assessment of user needs regarding documents, informational material, and services, the library system can be best designed around the users to meet their requirements adequately. This is important because the major objective of a library system is to satisfy the information needs of its users. Further understanding of their information needs could possibly lead to a continuous improvement in information services relevant to all groups of users.

Some such factors as given below may also be taken into scrutiny for improving the information use:

i. Arrangement of document collection, use of space, items of furniture and other equipments in the library system should possibly be user centred.
ii. Accessibility to library system is a key factor in determining the use of an information source.
iii. Awareness about the system and its sources so as to be able to use them skillfully.
iv. Transmission of information through inter personal communication should be enabled easily.
v. Designing of library and information services in such a manner as to make it possible to provide information within the minimum possible time regardless of the availability of information.

A number of user studies have been conducted over the years to assess the information needs of users working in different environments such as academic, industrial, technical, community, and so on. Studies about the information seeking behaviour of the users in educational environment, information use pattern
have also been made to know about the user traits, attitudes, approach to information, and so on. These studies also help in judging the limitations of library and information system and its services to exploit library/ information resources, to enhance the quality of collection, to predict future needs and use of information, to develop need based and user oriented academic library system.

6. SUMMARY

In this Module, the concept and meaning of user, who is regarded an important and central component in the academic library system. Library user is described as the pivot around which all the library activities and services are planned, designed, and then made available. It explains the various characteristics of library user and further describes the different types of academic library users who, though working in a homogeneous environment, have different kinds of information requirements depending upon the purpose of information use and subject/topic of their interest for which information is sought. As is generally presumed, information use, however, is not without problems because use is influenced by such factors as immense growth of literature /information, increase in needs for information, built-in intricacies of library system, and so on. In this context, discusses about the need for planning and designing of library system which should be, as far as possible, user-friendly so as to enhance the information use in the present electronic environment as well as the emerging Information Age in the times to come.