Students' Information Behaviour Along Their University Studies

A Case Study in Two Departments of The University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters – part one

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Abstract:
This study presents an excerpt from a practical research whose main objective was to concretely illustrate the way in which students use the necessary information and documentation resources in college, both for educational and research activities, and for administrative and extra-curricular ones. To carry out this research, students from two departments – the Department of Administrative Sciences and the Department of Communication Sciences of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bucharest – were considered for the bachelor's degree in Managerial and Administrative Assistance (MAA) and Information and documentation Sciences (IDS), and for the Master's degree in Information and Document Management (IDM) and Information Management in Contemporary Society (IMCG). The data collection tool was a questionnaire applied to all students in the two departments. These results can be used to highlight the impact of traditional resources, digital resources, the Internet, databases and, in general, all information and documentation resources on users and on learning and research activities in general.

Keywords: case study, information behaviour, students, information, information resources, access to information, information management

1. Introduction

To illustrate the concrete way in which students use the necessary information and documentation resources in college for both educational and research activities, as well as for administrative and extra-curricular activities, we envisaged a case study at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters[1].

Students from two departments have been involved, namely The Department of Administrative Sciences and The Department of Communication Sciences of the Faculty of Letters. For the bachelor's degree two programmes have been taken into account: *Managerial and Administrative Assistance* (*MAA*) and *Information and Documentation Sciences* (*IDS*). For the Master's degree the following programmes were taken into account: *Information and Document Management* (*IDM*) and in *Information Management in Contemporary Society* (*IMCS*).

A particularity of these specializations is that the students in *Information and Documentation Sciences*, as well as the Master's students in *Information Management in Contemporary Society*, have a higher level of knowledge in terms of information and

documentation. They are expected to be better versed in the theories and techniques associated with these fields due to the content of the subjects studied.

The data collection tool consisted of a questionnaire applied to all students in the two departments, for each year separately, without the need to constitute representative samples. The results obtained are essential to highlight the impact of traditional, digital resources, of the Internet, of databases and, in general, of all information and documentation resources on users and on learning and research activities.

The period of application and distribution of the questionnaires was between January and March 2020[2] being distributed to a sample of 434 people[3], representing students from the mentioned majors enrolled in the academic year 2019-2020. Following the application of the questionnaires, 324 responses (74.65%) were obtained, out of which 234 are coming from undergraduate students and 90 from Master's students.

The **purpose** of applying these questionnaires was to highlight the informational behaviour and the degree of satisfaction of the students in the use of information and documentation resources in the university environment. The level of preparation upon entering the faculty, the skills acquired in college, as well as the identification of the vulnerabilities that appear in the education process were investigated.

The **objectives of the research** consists in:
- Analysing the use of information and documentation resources in the university environment;
- Identifying the reason why students turn to information and documentation resources;
- Getting to know the intellectual work techniques in the elaboration of scientific papers and the difficulties encountered;
- Examining how the library and traditional resources are used;
- Identifying users' interest in printed resources;
- Quantifying respondents' satisfaction regarding the information resources provided at the university;
- Analysing the frequency of visits to the library;
- Finding out what happens when they are in the library and if the librarian's help is requested;
- Quantifying the level of knowledge of searching and retrieving information;
- Finding out how digital resources are used, including databases;
- Investigating the impact of using traditional resources versus digital resources;
- Identifying concrete ways to optimize the services providing information resources.

The **research methodology**, in accordance with the objectives, was based on a quantitative analysis, and the instrument used in collecting information was the questionnaire. Due to to the length of the study, we have decided to split it in two parts published in the same journal issue.

2. Elaboration of the Questionnaire

Initially, it started with 30 questions, but later they were narrowed down to 21 questions, structured in 4 categories. Of these, 20 are closed questions, i.e., they contain answer options, and, at the end, an open question through which we requested some suggestions from the students. Through their content, each question is very precisely focused on the targeted issue. The questions were grouped by chapters of interest.

The structure of the questionnaire is as follows:

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- The first set includes four general questions regarding the use of information resources, the reason why they are used, the resources used to create a work (report, study, license, dissertation), the knowledge of intellectual work techniques in the creation of scientific papers and the difficulties encountered;
- The second set includes five questions that aim to highlight users' interest in print resources, the frequency of visits to the library, the time spent in the library, the experience in the library, and the need for the librarian's help;
- The third set includes six questions asking users' opinions on the use of digital resources and of the Internet, the existence of databases, and the problems related to the use of databases;
- The fourth set includes five questions, of which three are formulated to obtain answers on a scale from 1 (Very satisfied) to 6 (Don't know/Don't answer). The goal was to quantify the respondents' satisfaction with the information resources provided at the university, the documentation and research skills acquired in college, the results obtained in college reflecting the assimilation of knowledge and the acquisition of specific skills, the difficulties encountered in using information resources, and users' opinion regarding the initiation of a course in information and documentation technology.

In addition to these categories, the questionnaire also contains an open-ended question allowing respondents to write comments or make suggestions. The answers were completed by ticking one or more answers to closed questions.

3. Representation and interpretation of the results

The recorded data from the answers included in the 324 questionnaires completed by bachelor and master students were processed using the *Microsoft Excel* program from the *Microsoft Office* suite. The result was a set of 20 spreadsheets, completed with the data from the questionnaire. The results obtained were presented for each year of study separately (undergraduate and Master's). To carry out a more complex analysis, graphs were developed allowing the comparison between years of study and facilitating the highlighting of the evolution of the students' informational behaviour in college.

In this first part of our study, we present the results of the first two sets of questions.
The first four questions aim to identify the motivation for using information resources.

 Why do you use information resources?
The first question refers to the reason why students turn to information resources: *Why do you use information resources?* This is an introductory question formulated as a multiple-choice question.
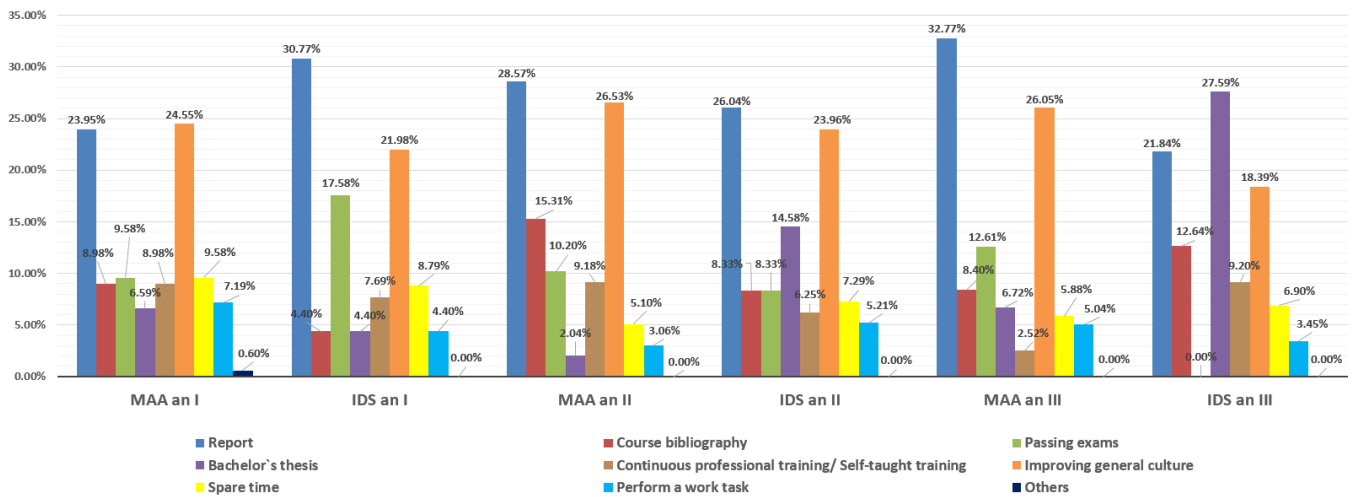
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Figure 1. *Comparative study in undergraduate students about the reason they turn to information resources*
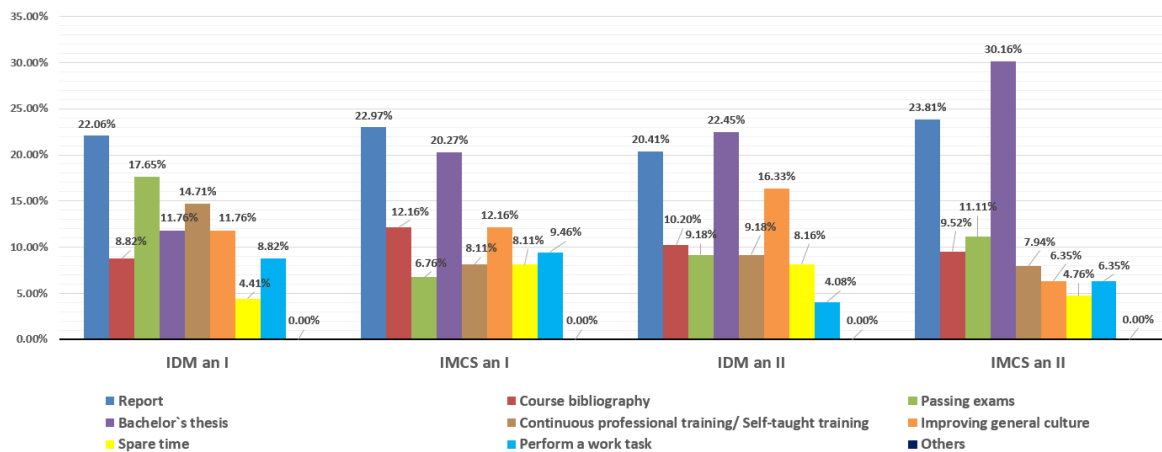

Figure 2. *Comparative study in Master's students about the reason they turn to information resources*

What information resources do you use when you must elaborate a report, a study, a bachelor's thesis, a dissertation, etc.?

The second question considered the knowledge of the typology of information and documentation resources used by the students in their learning and research activities.
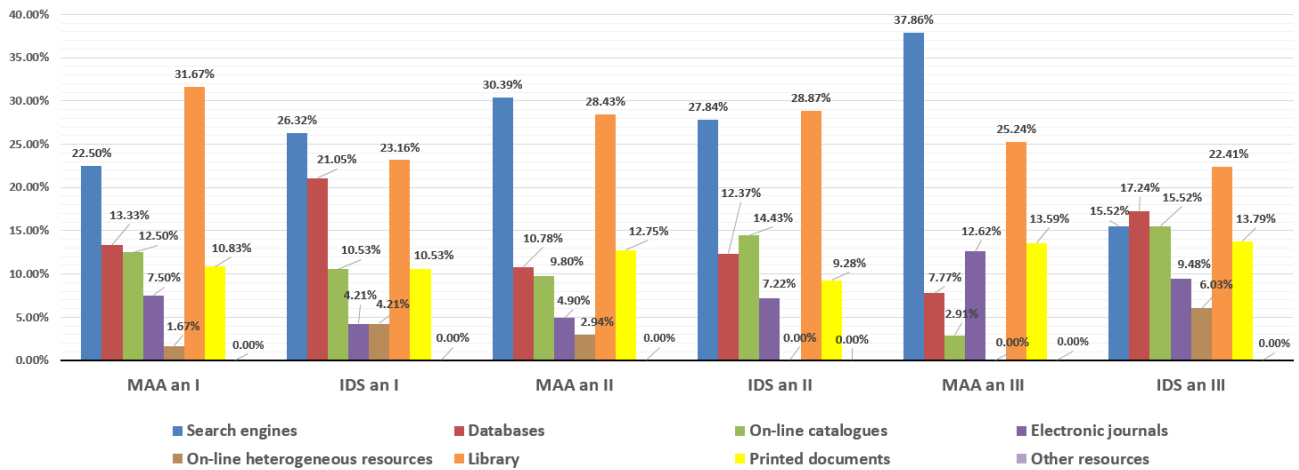
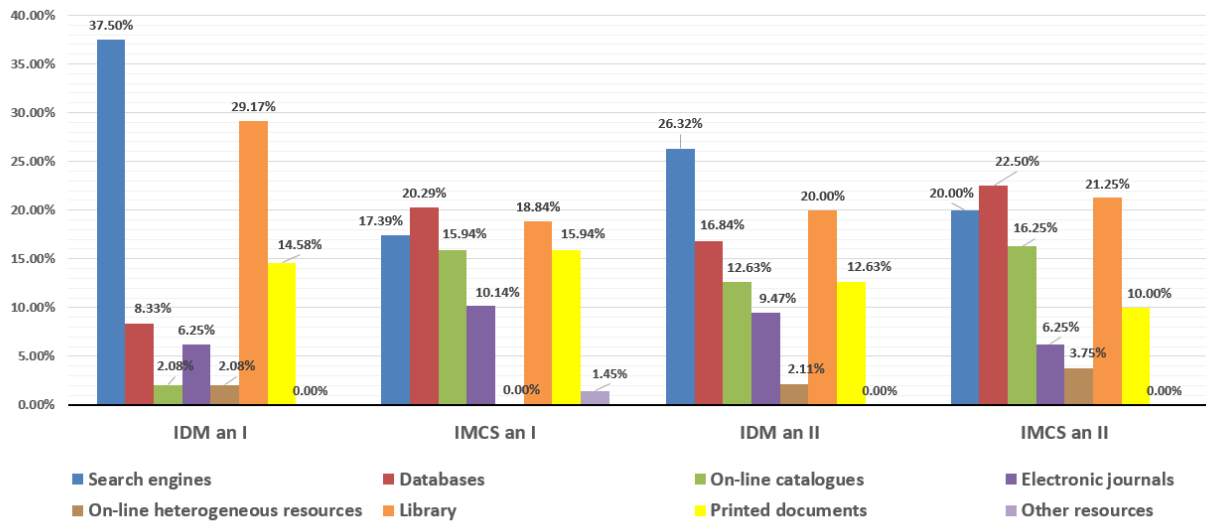**Figure 3.** *Comparative study in undergraduate students about the use of information resources*
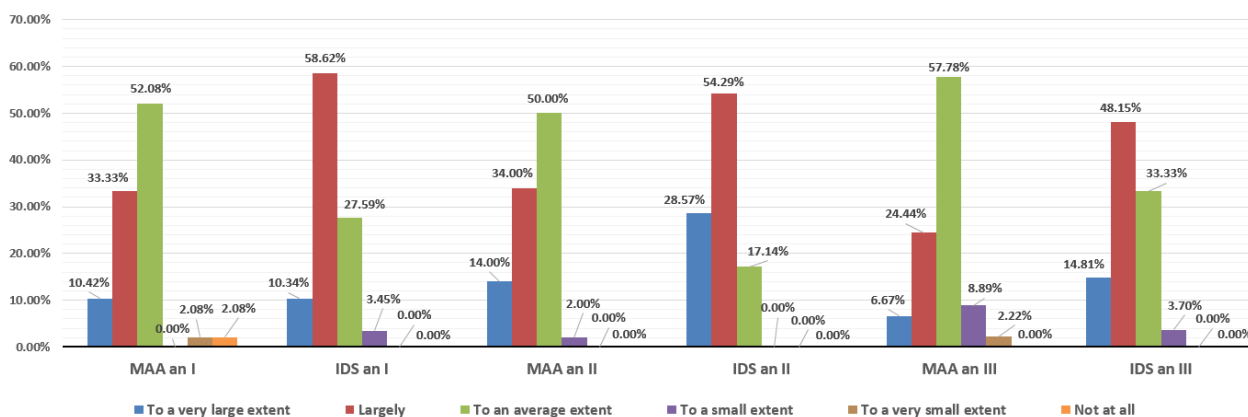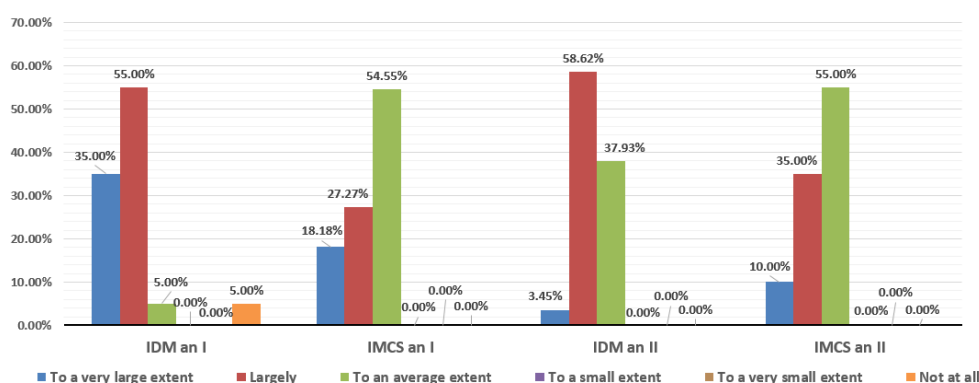

Figure 4. *Comparative study in Master's students about the use of information resources*

How well do you know the methods and techniques of intellectual work used in the elaboration of scientific papers?

The goal of question number 3, *How well do you know the methods and techniques of intellectual work used in the elaboration of scientific papers?*, a closed question, was to identify the degree of satisfaction about the methods and techniques of intellectual work used in the elaboration of scientific papers.
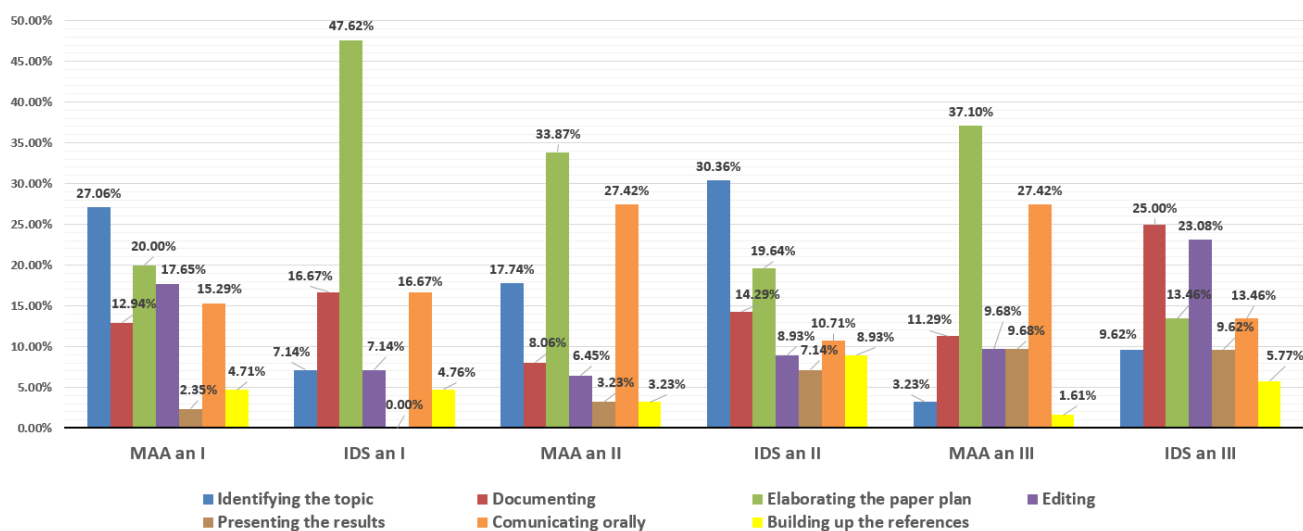
Figure 5. *Comparative study in undergraduate students about the methods and techniques of intellectual work used in the realization of scientific papers*

Figure 6. *Comparative study in Master's students about the methods and techniques of intellectual work used in the realization of scientific papers*

Where do you encounter difficulties while elaborating a scientific paper?

The goal of question number 4, *Where do you encounter difficulties while elaborating a scientific paper?*, a multiple-choice question, was to identify the vulnerabilities and difficulties highlighted by the students in information and documentation activities.

Figure 7. *Comparative study in undergraduate students about the difficulties encountered while elaborating a scientific paper*
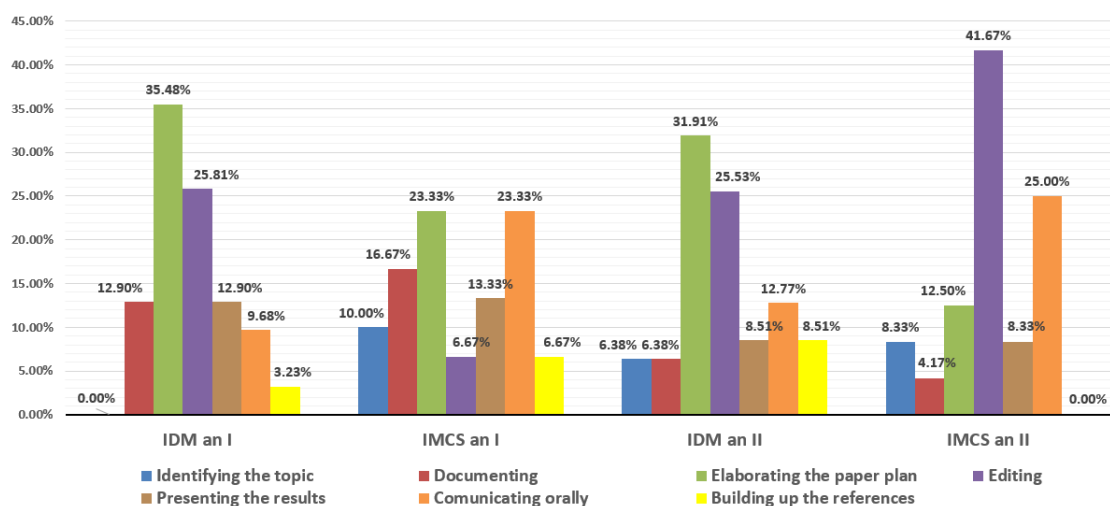
Figure 8. *Comparative study in Master's students about the difficulties encountered while elaborating a scientific paper*

The following five questions represent the second category of information that aims to identify the use of information and documentation resources mainly in the library.

How often do you use printed resources?

The goal of question number 5, *How often do you use printed resources?*, a multiple-choice question, was to identify the frequency of using traditional information and documentation resources.

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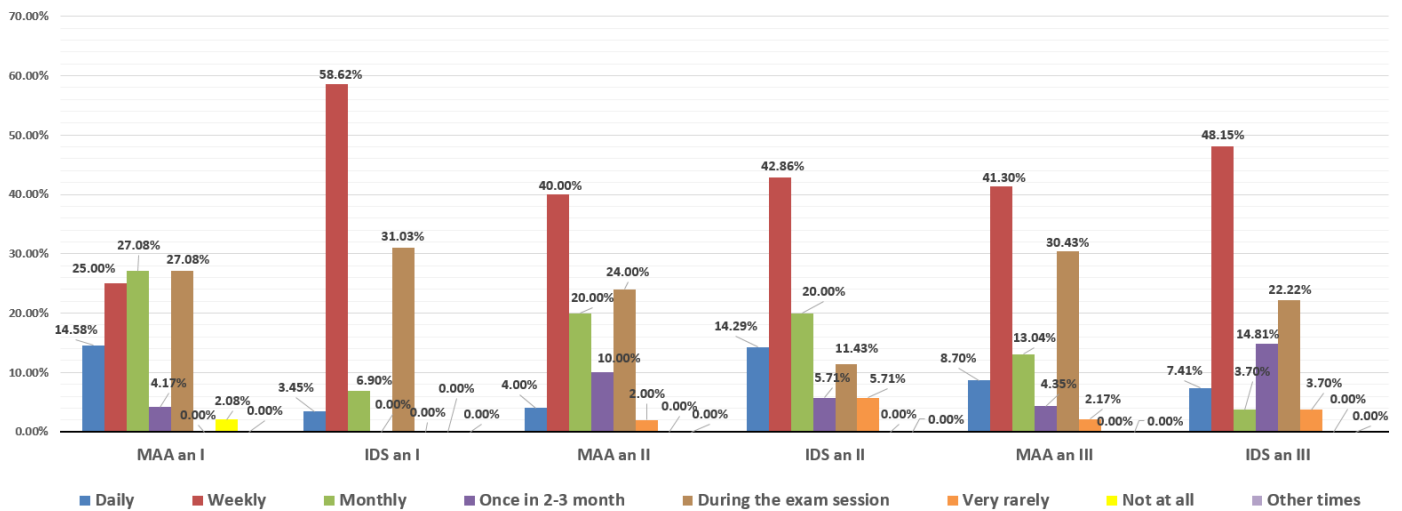
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Figure 9. *Comparative study in undergraduate students about how often they use print resources*
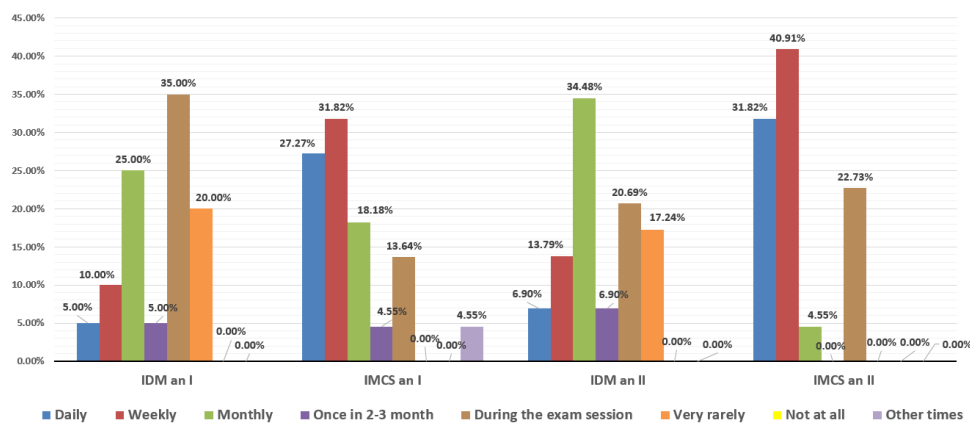

Figure 10. *Comparative study in Master's students about how often they use printed resources*

How often do you visit the library?

The goal of question number 6, *How often do you visit the library?*, a multiple-choice question, was to identify the frequency of use of the library by students for educational and research activities.

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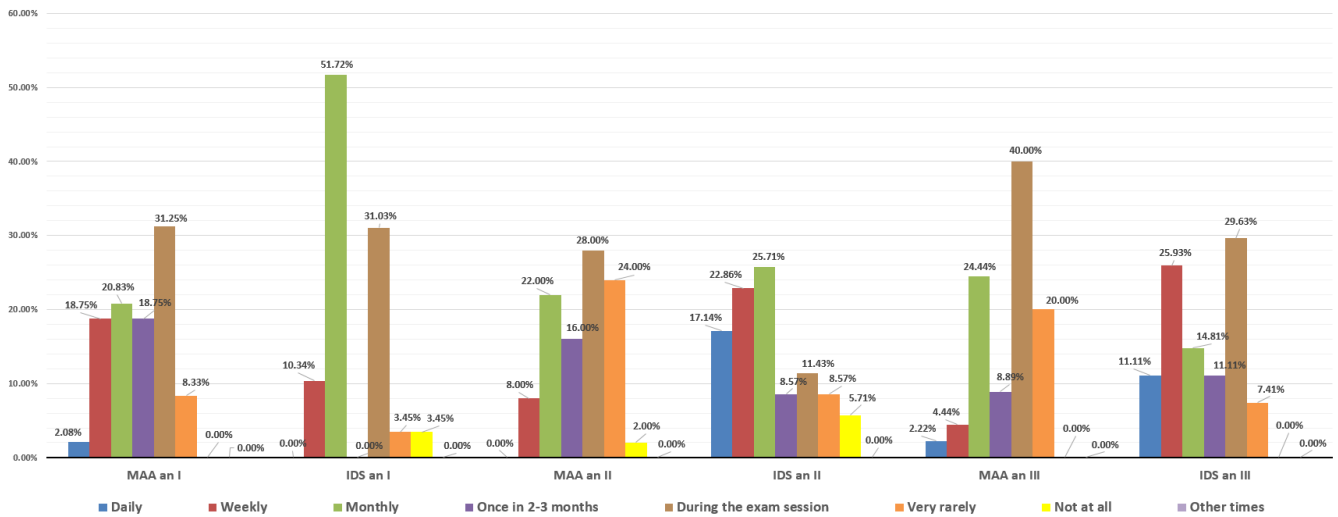
Figure 11. *Comparative study of the frequency of library visits in undergraduate students*

Figure 12. *Comparative study of the frequency of library visits in Master's students*

How much time do you spend in the library?

The goal of question number 7, *How much time do you spend in the library?*, a multiple-choice question, was to identify the time spent by the students in the library for information and documentation activities.
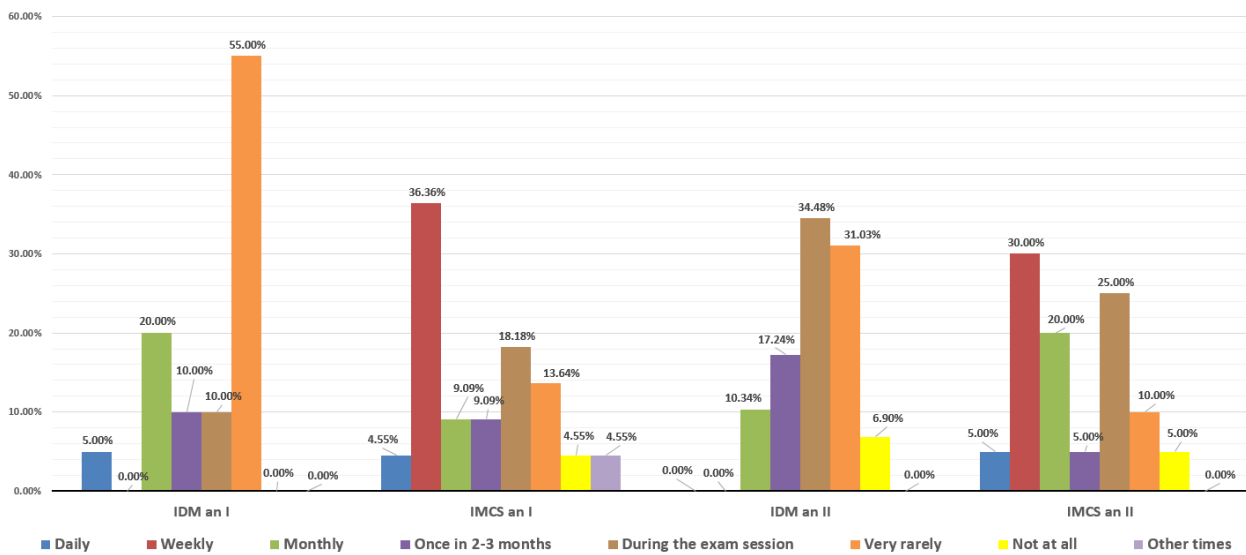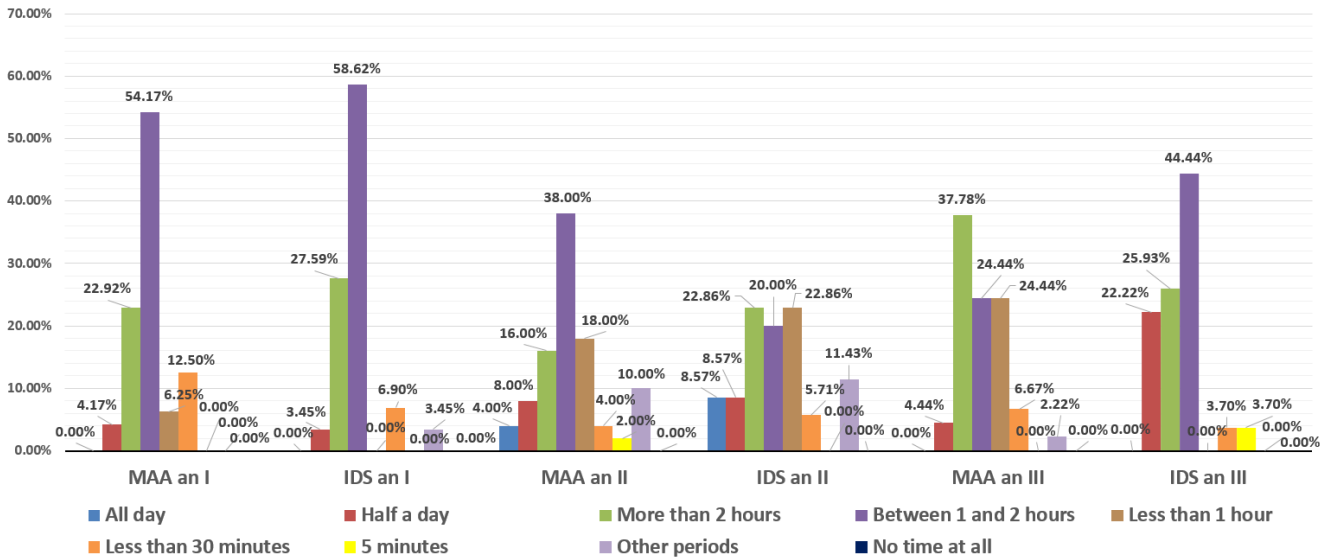
Figure 13. *Comparative study of time spent in the library by undergraduate students*
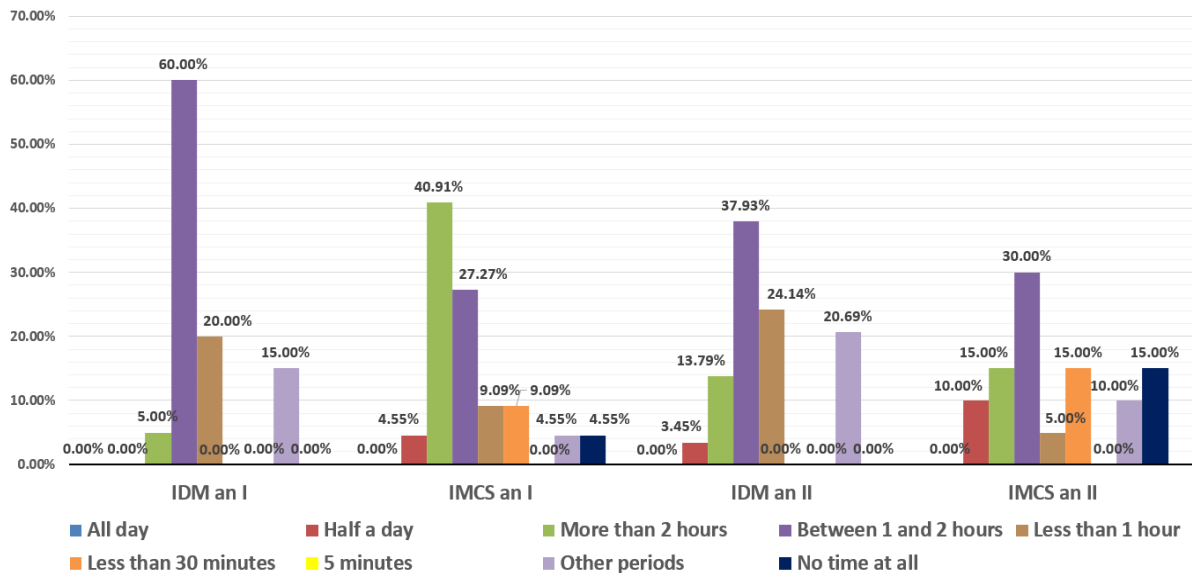
Figure 14. *Comparative study of the time spent in the library by Master's students*

What do you do when you are in the library?

The goal of question number 8, *What do you do when you are in the library?*, was to see the extent to which students are aware of the information and documentation products and services provided by libraries.

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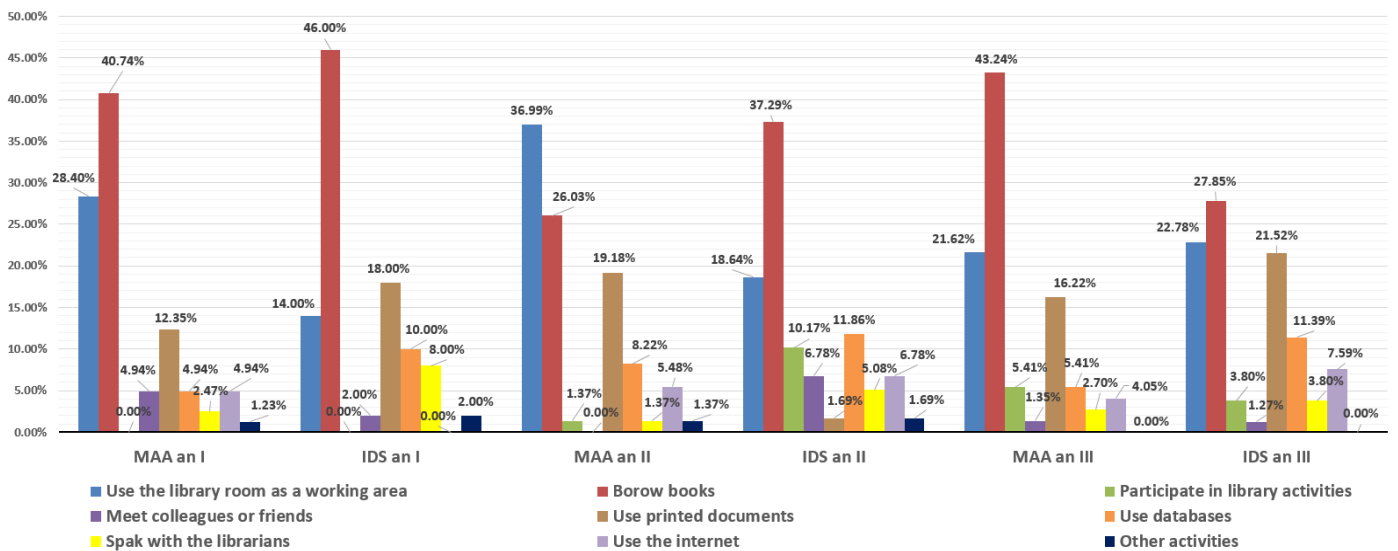
Figure 15. *Comparative study of activities carried out in the library by undergraduate students*

Figure 16. *Comparative study of activities carried out in the library by Master's students*

Do you ask the librarian for help to obtain information and documents?

The goal of number 9, *Do you ask the librarian for help to obtain information and documents?*, was to find out the extent to which the students call for the help of the librarian in accessing the information and documentation products and services provided by the libraries.

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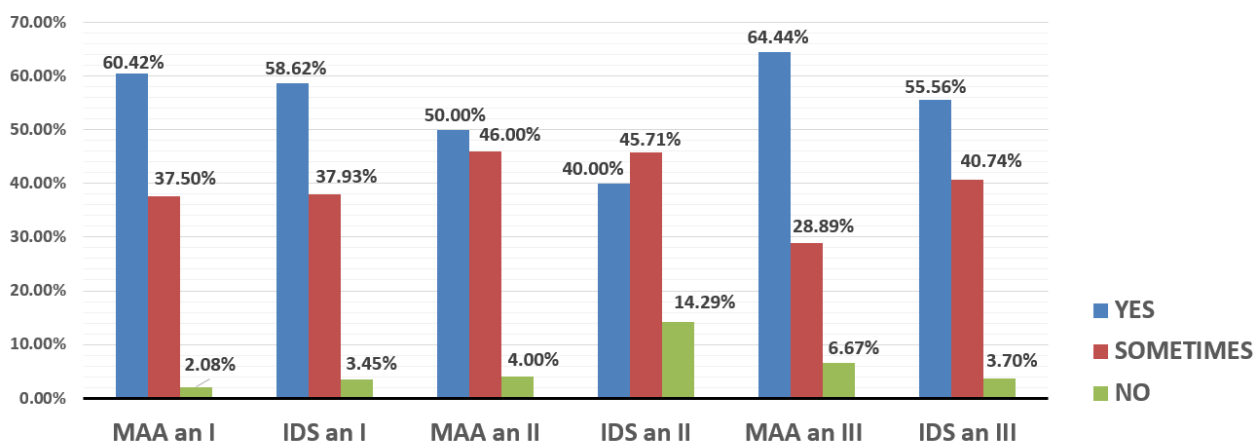
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Figure 17. *Comparative study of librarian's help-seeking by undergraduate students*
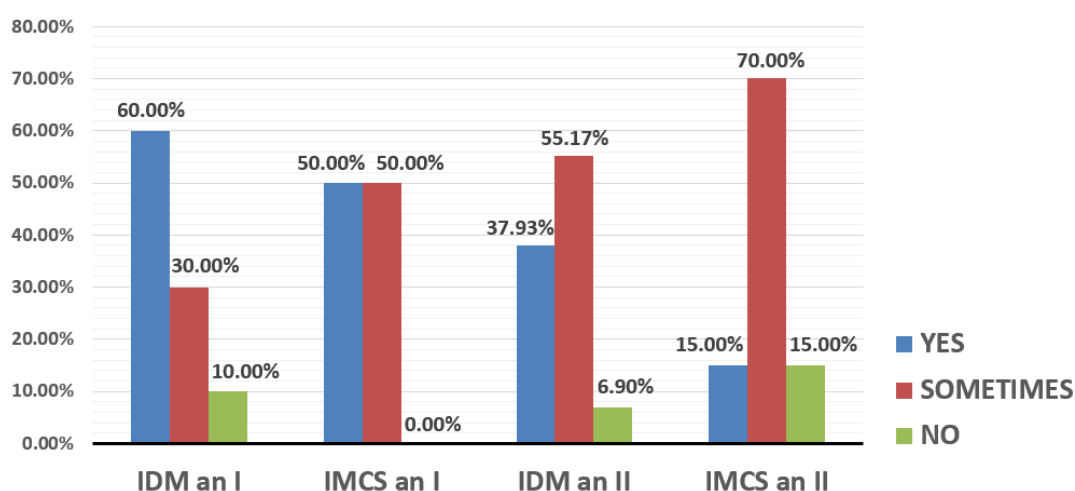

Figure 18. *Comparative study of librarian's help-seeking by Master's students*

4. Evaluation and Conclusions of Practical Research

Students, throughout their educational journey, know and understand that learning and being able to document themselves quickly and accurately are skills useful both for their individual progress and, later, indirectly, for progress in the service of the community.

The ever-increasing role of information, regardless of the support it is provided on, has led to an increase in the expectations of undergraduate (bachelor) and graduate (master) students regarding the effectiveness and quality of information and documentation resources, as well as the suitability of information products to their specific needs.

Given the accuracy of data collection, we believe that the responses of the surveyed students should be taken very seriously.

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The synthesis of the data obtained by applying the questionnaire allows the following conclusions.

From the first set of questions, we note that:

Students use the information resources especially for doing didactic tasks, for references, to pass exams, and less for spending their spare time or for work tasks;

In the process of elaborating a report, study, bachelor thesis, or dissertation, students prefer to use search engines and databases in a rather large percentage, compared to the traditional resources provided by the library;

First-year undergraduate students feel slightly disappointed and have higher expectations regarding the methods and techniques of intellectual work used in the elaboration of scientific papers;

When elaborating a scientific paper, students encounter difficulties in identifying the topic, developing the work plan, documenting, writing and communicating orally; differences in the assessment of difficulties are influenced by individual training in high school and/or by self-taught training; in the courses, in their opinion, more emphasis should be placed on the steps of creating a scientific paper, on identifying the topic, on developing the paper plan, as well as on the drafting and documenting aspects; emphasis should be placed in particular on bibliographic resources and on the building up of the critical apparatus, aspects considered very important for any scientific paper;

Printed resources are usually used "weekly" or "monthly", and especially "during exam sessions"; data analysis indicates a lower interest in library and print resources among first-year students in MAA and first-year Master's students at IDM; very few students use printed resources on a "daily" basis.

The second set of questions shows that:

A very low frequency of library use is observed among bachelor and master students; for example, first-year IDM master students, visit the library "very rarely" (55%), "monthly" (20%) and only "in session" (10%);

The time spent in the library is quite short, most students stating that they stay on the library premises "between 1-2 hours"; the percentage of those who spend "all day" in the library is quite small and it is limited to the second year of MAA (4%); many of them consider that the information in the library is insufficient to satisfy their information needs, and that some of the information provided on printed resources is outdated; library funds are renewed at a rather slow pace as a result of insufficient funding, which is why students turn to other resources than the library;

The main activities reported by most respondents are borrowing books or coming to the library to study in the reading room; borrowing books is the main reason for visits to the library; more than half of the students who responded confirm, again, the use of the library as a permanent resource for learning; this activity involves consulting the online catalogue and, therefore, students need to acquire skills in finding information;

Most undergraduate students, as well as Master's students, stated that they request the librarian's help to get various information and documents; this aspect shows that librarians have a rather important role in ensuring the quality of services for users; the library as an educational, informative and recreational centre should be a representative institution where the student feels welcome and receives the necessary information in a short time, the librarian representing the link between the student, the document and the information; among the reasons why students do not turn to librarians are: they have

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enough experience in using library services, they have guidance from colleagues or teachers, or they do not know that they can get information from the librarian.

To note that the students are interested in the use of the Internet and databases in the teaching-learning activity, both by the teachers in the course and by them in practical activities. The main impediment in successfully accessing and using digital resources, including databases, is insufficient theoretical knowledge and limited access and use skills. It is not by chance that the students, in an overwhelming percentage, pleaded for the introduction of a specialized discipline in finding information on specialized platforms.

Notes

[1] The present research is part of the doctoral research "Information and documentation resources in university education", publicly supported on September 9, 2022 at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters. We chose to separate and present this research study in two parts to comply with the page requirements of this publication and because we felt that a synthesis of the research would affect the full understanding of the results.
[2] The research results consider the period up to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and highlight how both traditional and digital resources are used.
[3] Figure taken from the annual research report and confirmed by the secretariat of the Faculty of Letters.

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