

Introducing Individual Research Consultation Services (IRC): A case study at Health-Care Sciences Library, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Research consultation services of a library provide expert guidance and support for various research-related activities in a university setting. The general objective of the study is to explore the research consultation services provided by the library professionals of the Health-Care Sciences library to MBBS and Nursing undergraduates of the Faculty of Health-Care Sciences, Eastern University of Sri Lanka from 2021 to 2025. Data were sourced from an Excel spreadsheet detailing the research consultation service for MBBS and Nursing undergraduates from 2021 to 2025. The dataset includes the year of consultation, the number of MBBS and Nursing students, the total students and consultations, the mostly & highly discussed topics, and feedback. In addition, the records duplicating research topics were also checked. The quantitative data was analyzed descriptively using Excel, and the feedback was analyzed for word count and sentiment using NVivo software. A total of 253 consultations were conducted over the period from 1st of January 2021- 30th of June 2025. A total of student participation peaked in 2022 (128 students). Nursing students outnumbered MBBS students after 2021. The most discussed topics varied by year. The most frequently discussed topic was data analysis, appearing in nearly 25% of all cases, followed by sample size calculation, research topic, and methodology. According to the sentiment analysis, positive sentiment is the highest, indicating that the overall user experience was favorable. The word cloud of the feedback shows that the users highly value clear explanations provided during consultations. Since it is a valuable service, it can be extended to other faculties, and similar services can be implemented at other universities as well.

Keywords: Health- Care Sciences, Individual Research Consultation (IRC), Library services, Research consultation services, Undergraduates

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Introduction

The role of a library is evolving from static service to dynamic service in the era where the libraries and librarians are no longer the custodians of information. Ranges of innovative services are introduced by libraries to cater different needs of the users. One of the key areas that a library needs to support is research, especially in higher education institute. To support the research studies of university students and staff, the Library of Eastern University, Sri Lanka introduced Research Support Service in 2014 and is the pioneer in introducing such innovative service in Sri Lankan university libraries (Ravikumar et al., 2015; Santharooban, 2022). This service mainly focuses on training the users on a range of topics related to research cycle by organizing a series of hands-on training sessions. As an extension of the Research Support Service, the Library introduced another service called ‘Individual Research Consultation (IRC)’ and this was mainly introduced at the Library of the Faculty of Health-Care Sciences. In fact, the service commenced in 2018, but it was officially announced at the Faculty Board in 2021. Therefore, the records were maintained from 2021. This service mainly targets the undergraduate researchers of the faculty (Santharooban, 2022). This is actually the role of liaison librarians. Isbell (2009) explains the liaison services at Fletcher Library at the West campus of Arizona State University (ASU). Accordingly, the consultation starts with the library and when the students first identify the topic for research. “With a proposed thesis topic in mind, the liaison librarian usually introduces the student to the relevant indexes, databases, and other appropriate research tools. In addition, they can together conduct a preliminary search on the thesis topic for the student’s working bibliography” (Isbell, 2009, p. 55–56). Ivan Portillo, a Health Science Librarian of Chapman University also reported a similar service at their university where the researcher meets the Subject Liaison Librarian for individual research consultation (Portillo, 2019).

In the Individual Research Consultation service of Eastern University, Sri Lanka, the undergraduate can meet the library professionals as individuals or groups to get research-related advice. Since the faculty has group research projects, students prefer to meet the library professionals as a research group. The consultation is a scholarly discussion and assistance on areas such as refining research questions and objectives, searching and identifying relevant literature (especially research papers), analyzing related literature and writing literature reviews, citation techniques, use of reference management systems and analyzing and interpreting data. The users requested to fix an appointment with library professionals before

the consultation. Individualized research consultation (IRC) is a one-on-one instructional session between a librarian and a user in order to assess the user's specific research needs and help them find information (Fournier & Sikora, 2015). While group instruction is a great way to introduce students to various library skills, individual research consultations allow for more in-depth questions that are specific to a student's information needs. Hussain & Rafiq (2023) carried out a study that aimed to determine the current research support services (RSS) provided by university libraries in Pakistan to their research communities throughout different stages of the research lifecycle. The findings revealed that over half of the university libraries in Pakistan were offering most research support services related to all phases of the research lifecycle. A larger proportion of libraries provided traditional research support services in comparison to the more advanced services that have emerged globally in recent years. Additionally, the study results indicated that private university libraries delivered a greater level of research support services than their public counterparts.

The faculty required the undergraduate to submit new topics for their research project rather than duplicating the existing topics. As such, the library started to offer the Research topic duplication checking service as an extension of IRC. Checking on duplicating research topics involves identifying whether a proposed research topic has already been sufficiently explored or if it overlaps significantly with existing research within the faculty. This process helps avoid redundant research efforts and ensures originality and novelty in research. This service started in January 2025. The students approach the library professionals to check the duplication or overlaps, and the library professionals provide detailed feedback to the students and their research supervisor. In this regard, the objective of the study is to explore the research consultation services provided to students from 2021 to 2025.

General objective

To explore the research consultation services provided to MBBS and Nursing undergraduates from 2021 to 2025

Specific objectives

- To analyze the trend in the Individual Research Consultations offered by the library
- To analyze the perceived usefulness of Research Consultations

Research Methods

This is a retrospective cross-sectional study, and the data were extracted from the records of IRC during the period from 1st of January 2021 to 30th of June 2025. The dataset includes the date of consultation, the number of students who participated, the consultation topics, and the students' feedback. In addition, the record of research topic duplication was also extracted. The quantitative data was analyzed descriptively, and the feedback was analyzed for word frequency. Excell was used to measure the frequency and percentage. NVivo and R software was used for sentiment analysis.

Results and Discussion

A total of 253 consultations were conducted over the year from 2021 to April 2025 (Table 1). Total student participation peaked in 2022 (128 undergraduates). Nursing students outnumbered MBBS students after 2021.

Table 1: Total number of consultations by year

Year	No of students		Total no of students	Total no of consultations
	MBBS	Nursing		
2021	79	30	109	55
2022	30	98	128	93
2023	27	89	116	56
2024	4	61	65	38
2025	15	14	29	11
Total	155	292	447	253

The most frequently and highly discussed topics

The most discussed topics are given in the bar chart (Figure 1 and 2). Accordingly, data analysis is the most frequently discussed topic, appearing in nearly 25% of all cases. Other highly discussed topics (10–15% range) include sample size determination, research topic, methodology, scientific writing, and literature review. The less frequently discussed topics (below 10%) include referencing, questionnaire, sampling method, research ethics, research objective and proposal writing. Howlett et al (2024) offered a contemporary perspective on the range and depth of research support services offered by university libraries in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. They shared a personal account of an evidence-based library and information practice approach to enhancing research support services at two universities in Australia. The research areas that received support from university libraries in Australia and

Aotearoa New Zealand included publishing, bibliometrics, supplementary research support services, advanced data skills, information retrieval, an introduction to library services, repository access, researcher profiles, copyright, reference management, and online engagement.

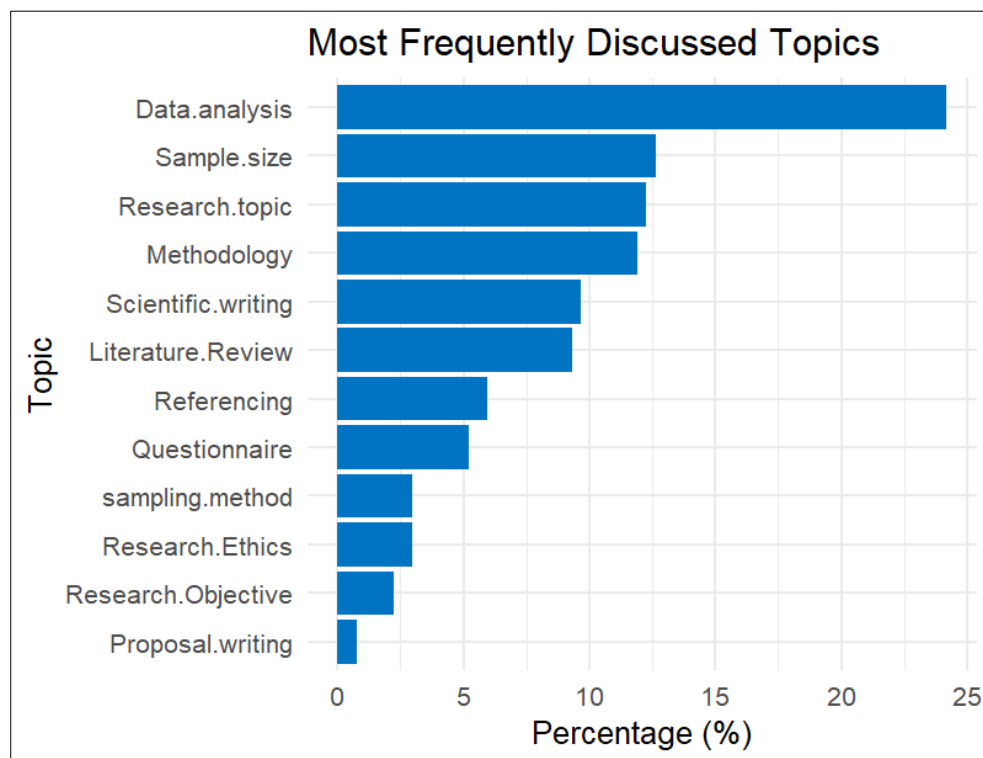


Figure 1: The most frequently discussed topics

The following table (Table 2) displays the highly discussed topics each year. In 2021, students most commonly required assistance in selecting a Research topic, followed by Literature Review and Sample size. The most discussed topic in 2022 was **Data Analysis**. In 2023, students had a dual concentration on data analysis and methodology. In 2024, the focus switched significantly to sample size and data analysis. In 2025, attention was given on referencing and data analysis. Fournier & Sikora (Fournier & Sikora, 2015) published a scoping review on Individualized Research Consultations in Academic Libraries to further enhance their knowledge of IRC assessment methods. They reported that Individual Research Consultations have been around for decades and help students at various stages of their research activities. Providing this personalized service one-on-one is time consuming for librarians, and should be better acknowledged and assessed.

Table 2: The highly discussed topics

Year	Topic	Count	Year	Topic	Count
2021	Research Topic	15	2023	Data Analysis	16
	Literature Review	10		Methodology	16
	Sample Size	10		Literature Review	8
	Methodology	9		Sample Size	5
	Data Analysis	4		Scientific Writing	4
	Research Ethics	4	2024	Sample Size	9
	Scientific Writing	4		Data Analysis	8
2022	Data Analysis	32		Referencing	5
	Scientific Writing	17		Methodology	4
	Research Topic	15		Questionnaire	4
	Literature Review	7	2025	Referencing	6
	Sample Size	7		Data Analysis	5
	Sampling Method	5			
	Questionnaire	4			

Sentiment in feedback

The feedback was analyzed for word count and sentiment. The following graph (Figure 2) shows the sentiment analysis. According to the analysis, positive sentiment is the highest, indicating that the overall user experience was very favorable. Trust appears second, indicating that users felt confident and assured of the service provided. Anticipation scores are at third, implying users were hopeful, expectant, or looking forward to future services. The next is joy is present, reinforcing satisfaction, though it is lower than trust and anticipation. The surprise appears but is less frequent, and it may be related to unexpected helpfulness. Negative sentiments, sadness and fear appear but with very low scores. This suggests only a small fraction of users had negative experiences or concerns. Further, Magi and Mardeusz (Magi & Mardeusz, 2013) surveyed students on their feelings before and after the individual consultation, and the comments they received demonstrate the value of individual consultation. It relieves students' anxiety, and instead of feeling overwhelmed, students felt encouraged and more focused.

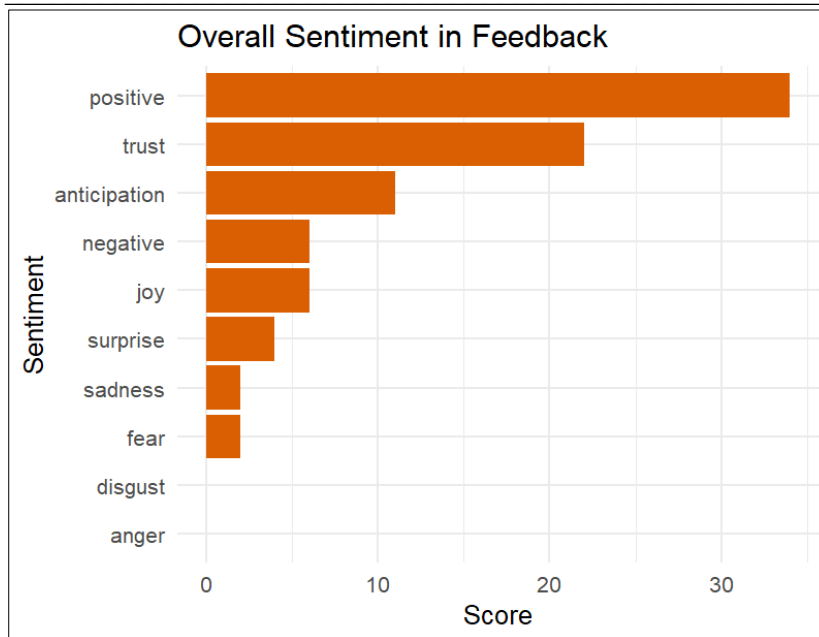


Figure 2: Overall sentiment in feedback

The word cloud of the feedback is given below (Figure 3), which shows that the users highly value clear explanations provided during consultations. The words like explanation, idea, and clarification show that conceptual clarity and idea development were core benefits. The words like knowledge, adequate, information, and topic suggest that users felt better informed and educated through the service.

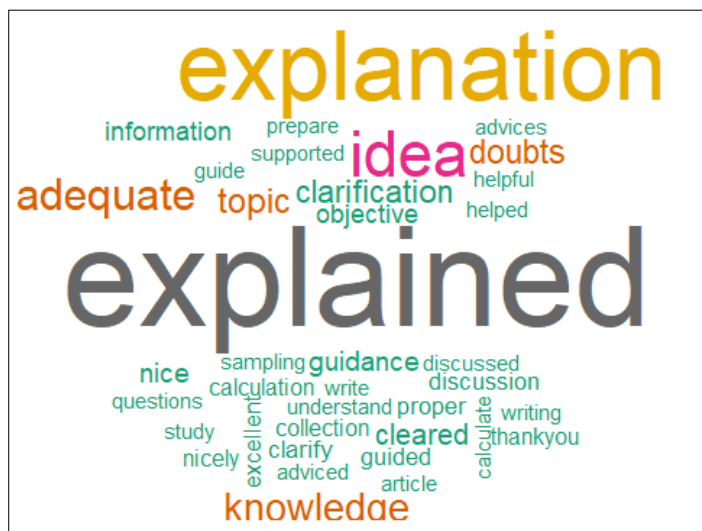


Figure 3: The word cloud of the feedback

Research topic duplication checking services

A total of 315 titles of research studies were checked for duplicates. The highest number-of research titles checked for MBBS Programme was-237 titles.

Table 3: Research topic duplication checking services

Programme	No of titles checked
MBBS	237
Nursing	78
Total	315

Conclusions

A total of 253 consultations were conducted between 1st of January 2021- 30th of June 2025. Total student participation peaked in 2022 with 128 students. Following 2021, nursing students outnumbered MBBS students. Data analysis was the most frequently discussed topic, accounting for approximately 25% of all conversations, followed by sample size calculation, research topic, and methodology. According to the qualitative analysis, positive sentiment is the strongest, indicating that the overall user experience was excellent. The word cloud of the comments demonstrates that the users strongly value the clear explanations offered during consultations. The results indicate that undergraduate students of the Health-Care Sciences Library significantly benefit from the Research Consultation Services (IRC).

Additionally, personalized research consultations are essential for enhancing the learning and research experience at universities. Instead of depending only on extensive research workshops, one-on-one research consultations cater to the specific research requirements of undergraduate students, promoting increased confidence and independence in their academic endeavours. Further, it strengthens the role of the academic library as an active partner, making it a vital resource for supporting undergraduate research. Hence, this kind of service also increases the recognition of academic librarians. In the era of artificial intelligence, librarians should focus on providing research consultation services and utilize their knowledge to support students, thus safeguarding the future viability of their profession. These services are critically important in today's context.

Limitations and Recommendations

The limitations include that the present research was based solely on existing student records, which may not accurately represent the entire student population. In addition, the analysis was primarily based on personal opinions rather than a standard assessment method. Implementing structured feedback forms would be more effective in gathering specific recommendations for improvement, as current feedback is positive and does not provide insight into potential flaws. Since it is a valuable service, it can be extended to other faculties, and similar services can be

implemented at other universities as well. Further, Librarians in academic institutions have been providing personalized services to the student population by offering individualized research consultations (IRC) for decades. These consultations usually consume many hours of librarians' busy schedules, and research should focus on quantifying the impact of individualized research consultations. Future efforts should focus on expanding consultancy capacity and integrating software training to meet student needs.

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