# Beyond borders: the influence of librarians, libraries and access to information for Papua New Guinean women participating in Australian university education

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## Abstract:

*Information literacy instruction has been a mainstay in university libraries across Australia for several decades now. Appropriately, much of this instruction remains geared towards assisting students achieve academic success. This paper provides a window into how libraries, librarians and access to information in a country like Australia can go beyond these educational goals however to greatly affect women's lives from a developing country when they return to their own socio-cultural contexts. In particular the paper is based on data collected for a current PhD study from twenty three women, representing all four regional areas in the diverse nation of Papua New Guinea. The women articulated their experiences and described how they negotiated their traditional information systems with those of the expansive information environment they had been immersed in during their time in Australia. They gave examples of how libraries (including those beyond their universities), librarians and almost unfettered access to information had influenced them. They also provided a number of stories about how they were subsequently using information differently to improve other Papua New Guinean women's lives and contribute to the ongoing struggles for gender equality in the largely male-dominated nation.*

**Keywords:** Information literacy, socio-cultural contexts, academic libraries, women.

## INFORMATION LITERACY AND THE AUSTRALIAN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

Academic libraries in Australia have had the development and provision of information literacy instruction as one of their main roles since around the early 1990s. It was at this time that generic skills development being incorporated into undergraduate educational programs was being touted as significant in reports to the Australian government. Aside from espousing the educational benefits to be gained from doing this was the underlying assumption that students would also become lifelong learners and more personally empowered (Bundy, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary, 1994; Mayer, 1992). University libraries

thus became central to university-wide projects to embed information literacy instruction into curricula and this ambition continues today (such as Corbin & Karasmanis, 2009; Dobozy & Gross, 2010; Hamilton, 2008; Hiscock & Marriott, 2003; Lipu, 2003; Meldrum & Tootell, 2000; Salisbury et al., 2012; Wallace, Shorten, Crookes, McGurk, & Brewer, 1999 to name a few).

Despite the discourse and rapid acceptance of the need for information literacy skills and knowledge in the ever-changing information environment, there is still minimal research into information literacy outside the educational context, particularly in comparison to the vast amount of literature there is about information literacy teaching and programs. There is more research emerging about the transferability of skills and knowledge to students' professional lives once they graduate. Despite Australia having a significant international student population, there is also relatively little about international students and information literacy outside of the focus on the impact of language differences and learning styles that might impact on information literacy training. A major gap in the literature exists about the socio-cultural contexts international students emerge from, or how information experiences gained through Australian university education might impact on them when they return home.

This is rather interesting since international education is Australia's fourth largest export industry and a report published in February 2013 indicated that this industry brought in $15.7 billion during 2011, primarily through the higher educator sector (International Education Advisory Council, 2013). Across Australia, international students were said to make up 21.3% of the total student population in 2011 and as of April 2013, there were 187,059 students enrolled in Australian universities. The highest portion of these students come from Asia - with China , India, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam representing approximately 61% of international enrolments (Australian Education International, 2013). Aside from these 5 Asian countries, statistics derived from Australian Education International reveal that approximately another 25% of the total international student population come from other developing countries (as defined by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) so it could be argued that Australia plays a significant role in international education service to these countries.

In relation to the information literacy programs that are provided through Australian universities however, whether they are embedded or generic in nature, it is typically assumed that the outcomes will be the same for all students, domestic and international, men and women and regardless of socio-cultural contexts.

Most of my library career up to 2008 had been spent working in Australian academic libraries, with a key focus on developing and implementing information literacy programs. I had also been involved in the development and editing of the Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework (both editions).  In addition, I had spent nearly nine years working as a teacher's college librarian/lecturer in Library Studies in Papua New Guinea. Over time it became more apparent that it would be worthwhile to investigate the information experiences of women from a predominantly male-dominated, oral-based developing country such as Papua New Guinea - about their own socio-cultural contexts and as students who had studied in Australian universities. This led onto a doctoral study focussed on exploring links between information literacy and personal empowerment, and the impact of the information experiences from the Australian international education experience when they returned home. The ensuing discussion represents some of the findings currently being written up for the

thesis around the sections of data that highlighted the influence Australian librarians and libraries have had on their everyday lives.


## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse nations of the world, with more than 800 recognised language groupings (Summer Institute of Linguistics International: Papua New Guinea, 2013). It is also a developing country facing significant challenges.

In the latest United Nations Development Programme report, PNG is ranked 156th out of 186 countries and is the largest developing country in the South Pacific (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2013, p.143). Currently, PNG is considered the only country in the south Pacific Region off track to meet any of the 7 United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) comprising of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving Universal Primary Education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child morality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and ensuring environmental sustainability (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), 2011).

Women in Papua New Guinea face particular challenges and, at present, PNG ranks 134th out of 186 countries on the Gender Inequality Index - a measure which considers maternal mortality rates, adolescent fertility rates, seats in parliament, educational levels, labour force participation, contraceptive prevalence and care during reproduction (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2013, p.158). Whilst this ranking has improved for the first time in years, others - such as maternal mortality rates - are getting worse, rather than better. As reported in a recent research study about maternal mortality rates in one of PNG's largest hospitals, the maternal mortality rate is approximately 773 per 100,000 live births; one of the highest figures in the world (Sanga, de Costa, & Mola, 2010).

Gender-based violence, including sexual violence, is a major concern for women, and has been the subject of extensive research (Abirafeh, 2009; Ganster-Breidler, 2010; Hinton & Earnest, 2010; Lewis, Maruia, & Walker, 2008; Macintyre, 2008; Onyeke, 2010). In 2011 a UN Special Rappateur on Torture reported on a visit made to PNG in May 2010:

> *… women were at a very high risk of abuse in the private and public spheres. During arrest and detention, police officers tortured and ill-treated women, subjecting them to sexual abuse – it appeared that police frequently arrested women for minor offences with the intention of sexually attacking them. Police punished women detainees by placing them, or threatening to place them, in cells with male detainees, where many were gang-raped (Amnesty International, 2011, n.p.)*

The recently retired Opposition leader, Dame Carol Kidu, was the sole female parliamentarian in the country for 15 years up until the 2012 elections when 3 new women gained seats. Dame Kidu had been an advocate for women's rights, including improving female participation rates in education and providing better access to information for them, for many years (Kidu, 1997). Despite significant resources, educational inequalities persist (Deklin, 2008; Tuaru, 2008), and the minority of women within the population that do reach higher education still face many obstacles in everyday life (Spark, 2010).

Nevertheless, the women in this study shared many positive stories of how libraries, librarians and access to information from being in the Australian university education environment have led to them actively using information to change their own lives, and the lives of other women and fellow Papua New Guineans.

When the study started, there were 189 Papua New Guinean students in total enrolled in Australian universities (Australian Education International, 2008). Twenty-three Papua New Guinean women were interviewed, four of whom who were still studying in Australian universities at the time of data collection and the remaining nineteen who had returned to PNG. Questions focussed around the women's experiences and use of information growing up in their own socio-cultural contexts, as students of Australian universities, as professionals in their wide variety of workplaces, and generally as educated women living in PNG.


**THE HUMMING LIBRARIANS**


Overwhelmingly the women referred to the librarians in Australian libraries as "helpful" and "approachable". Julie added to these common descriptions by saying:

> *You know, looking for information is very, very stressful for me. Like if I ask them, some of them would come and while they're looking for it, they will be sort of humming a little song or whatever, and that makes me feel really relaxed.*

Despite this general view that the librarians were there to help, many of the participants used intermediaries to get to the staff they needed or the information they wanted. These intermediaries included lecturers, international student advisers, and fellow students or organisations they were familiar with. Another popular option was people who had previously lived and worked in Papua New Guinea. One student said that for her, the university counsellors were the ones who helped her "survive" academic life; and when she was asked about her choice of them to help her with information-based needs she said she went to them because:

> *I think because of the way they spoke to me. And the way they were, they received me and helped me, that gave me the courage to go back and I knew, somehow I knew, they would save me anyhow. Paula*

Augustine claimed that the relied on librarians "a lot" which she found very helpful. She also shared a personal story about how her mother had been very sick just when she was preparing to go to Australia for studies so she had arrived later than the other students. She explained how overwhelmed she felt when she saw the other students - who she perceived to know what they were doing. She told me that a librarian approached her and asked if she was okay. When she found out that Augustine had missed Orientation week, she took her around the library personally and gave her all of her contact details in case she wanted more help. Augustine referred to her as "my librarian friend". She explained that the librarian would not only help her by collecting items physically for her if she had difficulties but also, she would give her one-on-one staggered instruction to help her learn the process of breaking down an assignment question and locating relevant material.

Despite many of the women describing growing confidence in their technological skills, only one mentioned seeking help from librarians through chat. She really enjoyed this for the anonymity; a reason commonly found to be why users like it (Meulemans, Carr, & Pearl, 2010; Xiangming, Dimitroff, Jordan, & Burclaff, 2011):

> *…you can carry on a conversation with somebody who can tell you what to do and they get back to you without the fear of them knowing who you are and how dumb you may be, you know.* Francesca

Navigating big, unfamiliar libraries was a common source of frustration and many of the women talked about how much they appreciated help being shown physically where items were that they were looking for, from any staff member shelving through to faculty librarians who offered them this help.

## THE VAST INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT: A BLESSING AND A CURSE

It was not only the physical size of the libraries that the participants mentioned, but also the vast amount of information available electronically, the other libraries that they found useful to them and other places they discovered as rich sources of information. On the one hand, the amount of information which was perceived as being positive and helpful while on the other hand, it was considered overwhelming and confusing - especially at the start of their studies. Anastasia, for example, said:

> *...information was at your finger tip - emails, e-books, e-journals, databases...information was readily available to access. There was so much information and I found it overwhelming.*

Doreen extrapolated on this in her description:

> *Some of the time, you know, I'm wondering, sometimes there's too much information. You don't really know what's relevant to, like to first eyesight I'm thinking that everything's relevant; but the problem is that how can I utilise the most recent, most relevant information. That was a bit difficult.*

Many of the women said, however, that their confidence did grow over the duration of their studies. Some of the skills they felt they had developed better included greater technological abilities and comfort with searching online, using the databases more effectively and being able to be more critical in their selection and use of material. Bernadette, for example, used the analogy of a recipe:

> *…if you read something you should be critical about what you read. Not that it's bad but that you try to see both sides of the story; so whatever it is that I'm reading I try to be…you've got to be critical of what you acquire…like it could be a new recipe, a cooking recipe. Okay you've got to use all those ingredients but you don't always have to use <u>everything</u>.*

The participants also mentioned using public libraries, which was not something that they had typically grown up to have access to, or understand the purpose of - that is, even if they knew

they existed in their area. One participant admitted that if she could not get what she needed in her Canberra-based university library she would try the local public library and if they did not have it she would use the National Library of Australia and expressed surprise at herself doing that:

> *...the best place to go is the National Library and that's how far I've gone in Australia; up to the National Library. I became a member...*

Dorothy talked about her astonishment at the amount of information available in non-library places:

> *...when I go to the Health Centre, the uni Health Centre and I sit down and I look at all the information that's there I said "Gee, they have access to a lot of information here" and when I went back the first time I took <u>heaps</u> of, you know, pamphlets and things back...*

Francesca told me about how she made use of information available to the general public on issues of interest to her:

> *...I go and attend seminars everywhere...*[like] *how to make money on the Internet.. how to do property options..I did not confine myself to, you know, what was given to me in class..these things are just to enrich myself...*

As a single, professional mother of five children, Francesca told me that her goal in learning about these issues was to further her opportunities to improve their lifestyles through such business ventures. She told me she actively encouraged other students to make use of such sources of information rather than focussing on just their studies while they had the chance.


## CHANGING LIVES THROUGH INFORMATON

The ready access to information in Australia as compared to Papua New Guinea was something many of the participants made reference to. This was particularly highlighted in terms of the <u>value</u> placed on information:

> *You know in a third world country whatever information you have would be of benefit to another person and eventually the whole nation. Barbara*


There was also much reference to the lack of access to information at all levels of education, employment and society in general. As a result, the majority felt it was an imperative for them to use their experiences for the benefit of others. Every participant in the study identified themselves as someone who used information well and at the root of their own descriptions of what this meant, they were primarily talking about *sharing*. Having grown up in a culture where information of value was primarily passed to women from other women in their extended families, sharing information - particularly orally - was still considered essential to the women in this study. As Mary explained:

> *In the moulding of a person, as a woman, that oral information you're taught about what's the right thing to do, what's the wrong thing to do, that stuff does not stem from books for many of us but from what your mother or grandmother tells you.*

The women provided many examples of how they utilised these oral practices, along with the information skills and knowledge they gained from the Australian information environment, to make positive changes in their own lives, and the lives of others when they returned home, particularly around socio-cultural issues they experience in Papua New Guinea such as gender-based violence and critical health issues.

Most of the participants, for example, raised their concern about the high levels of HIV/AIDs in Papua New Guinea and that they felt there was not enough accurate and up-to-date information readily available to everyone in the country, particularly in the very remote areas. Josephine said that she liked to keep herself informed with the latest developments through ongoing research into the topic and aside from how she utilised this information for her job, she also ran sessions in her home for local youth about it. Maria said that she relied heavily on international information about successful intervention and treatment programs about the disease in her job as well.

The high maternal mortality rate was another health issue mentioned by many of the participants. Ruby worked for an organisation that liaised with several government departments and other organisations to develop and implement programs to improve the maternal mortality rate. As she said:

> *...any information we can get on improving our programs is vital to us. Gender based issues, reproductive health rights...all of this is always vital to us, information that we can use to inform ourselves as well as disseminating to our program implementing partners. We also work with the university and whatever information we get we encourage our implementing partners to create libraries so that we can pass on any information we get - booklets, newsletters, reports...I also collect them and give them to my children to take them to their school libraries as well..*

In addition to doing these things as part of her employment, Ruby - like Josephine - actively sought opportunities in her personal time to discuss many issues around reproduction and sexually-transmitted diseases with teenagers and young adults. Even though it was not related to her work at all, Mary told me that since she had access to the Internet and had set up means of collecting up-to-date information about birth control and other reproductive issues, she passed on such information to her female cousins either orally or with print materials since they did not have that "privilege".

One of the issues around gender-based violence that the women mentioned frequently was the lack of awareness about their legal rights. Agnes had experienced a great deal of personal anguish in her marriage, and shared with me how she had left her husband and now tried to be a "role model" for other women by helping them understand their legal rights, particularly in relation to getting child support. She said that she not only talks to women in her church and through her social circles, but helps some navigate the court processes to ensure that they get the child support they are seeking.

When asked why the women shared the information they did, Augustine's comment seemed to represent much of what the women felt overall:

*...if I know like the information that I've gained, and if I believe that that information needs to be given out to the populace of Papua New Guinea it is a right that should be given out, that piece of information and if I withhold it back then I'm not doing the right thing.*

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study found that the information environment available through Australian university education does afford women from a developing country such as Papua New Guinea opportunities to improve their own lives and the lives of others in their nation. This information environment includes access to professional librarians, information literacy training, resources and services from a range of libraries and other rich information sites. In this study, the women used their prior, and newly acquired information skills and knowledge to address major challenges within their country such as gender-based violence and critical health issues, amongst others. Given Australia's significant role in the provision of international education to developing countries it seems that further research into the information contexts international students come from, and return to, would be beneficial in understanding how to maximise their interactions with the Australian information environment.

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