

Submitted on: 21 June 2026

Bridging the Digital Divide: The Role of Academic Libraries in Empowering NEET Youth Through Information Literacy

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Abstract:

With the developments and introduction of various technological tools, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), the ability and skills to locate, access, and evaluate information for meeting various needs has become increasingly pertinent. However, in South Africa, many young people lack appropriate information literacy skills, which can restrict their capacity to meet daily information needs and make informed decisions. The focus of this study is the North-West University (NWU). This study was part of a Science Shop Project conducted at the NWU under the umbrella study titled “Re-imagining community education post COVID 19: Mobilizing unemployed youth as community assets to reduce the educational divide in a South African township. The NWU Library and Information Service (NWU LIS) participated as a collaborative stakeholder in the project as part of contributing to Goal 3: Integrate and align community engagement with teaching-learning and research to develop a culture of active citizenship of the university strategic plan, and also the aligned NWU LIS strategic priority of Engage and Position, which aims to promote the library as a changemaker in bridging social disparities within communities. It aimed to capacitate NEET youth at two community centres in information and digital literacy and then the youth were expected to be “Information Literacy” Ambassadors in their communities. This study aimed to explore the impact of an information and digital training programme specifically designed for NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth in the Khuma (Stilfontein) township of South Africa. Topics taught included fake news, searching for study and employment opportunities, climate

change and misinformation. A Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach was implemented, using a focus group to gather data. The results showed that the information literacy (IL) intervention enhanced participants' awareness and understanding of searching skills and ethical considerations surrounding information, such as fake news, climate change, misinformation, and plagiarism. Academic libraries must collaborate with community organizations and public libraries to develop targeted interventions for this user groups.

Keywords: information literacy, NEET, South Africa, fake news, climate change

In the digital age, access to reliable and reputable information is critical for personal and everyday life purposes. With the developments and introduction of various technological tools, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), the ability and skills to locate, access, and evaluate information for meeting various needs has become increasingly pertinent. However, many young people lack appropriate information literacy skills, which can restrict their capacity to meet daily information needs and make informed decisions. This study intended to close this gap by providing the youth, referred to in this project as the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, and Training) with information literacy skills, facilitated by NWU librarians, and empowering them to transmit this knowledge to school learners. The NEET in the study predominantly live in townships. It was anticipated that this study will promote a culture of critical thinking, informed decision making and proficient information use among the youth.

In South Africa, townships refer to historically underdeveloped urban residential areas that were designated for non-white communities during the apartheid era. Despite the end of apartheid in 1994, townships remain underdeveloped with many still facing challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, high unemployment, and limited access to quality services (Uduku 2024). The townships also have a high population of Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) youth which is like others in South Africa. The NEET often faces social and economic exclusion, compounded by limited access to relevant and reliable information sources that could enable them to navigate opportunities in education, skills development, and employment (Mascherini and Ledermaier, 2016). In South Africa, the situation is particularly dire, with reporting that over 40% of young people aged 15–34 are classified as NEET (Statistics South Africa 2025). These youth often reside in marginalised communities where the digital divide, socioeconomic barriers, and low levels of information literacy intersect, contributing to a cycle of exclusion and disempowerment (Rahmani & Groot, 2023).

This study is as a result of a science shop project which is a facility, faffiliated with a specific university department or a non-governmental organization (NGO), that provides independent, free, participatory research support in response to civil society concerns and issues (Mulder,2003). As a result of the science shop the term “information literacy ambassadors “was introduced by the researchersThis project was funded by the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) and the National Research

Foundation (NRF), as part of the Science Shop. A science shop is a facility, frequently affiliated with a specific department of a university or a non-governmental organization (NGO), that provides independent, free, participatory research support in response to civil society concerns and issues. It takes a demand-driven, bottom-up approach to research (SAASTA, 2024).

The project sought to examine the role and effectiveness of Information Literacy (IL) Ambassadors as peer educators and advocates for information literacy within rural communities in South Africa. Peer-assisted learning models have increasingly been adopted by academic libraries as a means of extending information literacy support beyond traditional librarian-led instruction, while simultaneously enhancing student engagement and ownership of learning.

Further, the project aimed to explore the structure, implementation, and range of activities to be undertaken by Information Literacy Ambassadors. The activities that were conducted as part of the project were:

a. Information needs assessments

A brief survey and interviews was conducted as part of information needs analysis for the youth, while also evaluating their information literacy skills.

b. Content developments

The librarians involved in the project worked on a content for the training sessions, based on the feedback from the information needs analysis and identify topics to be covered.

c. Training sessions

Schedule training sessions in liaison with the project administrators were arranged. The sessions included information literacy facilitation, hands-on exercises, group discussions, and practical demonstrations. The training curriculum included:

- Identifying an information need.
- Ethical and critical use of online resources.
- Evaluating misinformation and fake news.
- Climate change and the environment
- Applying for jobs online & verifying health information.
- Using AI tools—ChatGPT, Meta AI

d. Resource recommendations

Librarians recommended to the NEET relevant open-access platforms and tools to use in searching for credible and reliable information.

e. Follow-up sessions

There were follow-up sessions to engage with the youth on issues/ questions they encountered after the training, while also evaluating the impact of the training through a survey and interviews.

Literature Review

A review of the recent literature shows a growing interest in student-led and peer-assisted approaches to information literacy instruction in formal and informal settings. These programmes are increasingly viewed as effective mechanisms for extending library outreach, fostering student engagement, and developing leadership capabilities among participating students.

A relevant African study is Sulle's (2022) investigation of the Students' Knowledge Ambassador Programme at Mzumbe University, Tanzania. The study evaluated the effectiveness of student ambassadors in promoting the use of electronic information resources among university students. The findings revealed that ambassadors played a significant role in increasing awareness and utilization of e-resources through peer-to-peer engagement and advocacy activities. The study concluded that student ambassador programmes can serve as an effective extension of library services while simultaneously developing ambassadors' communication and information skills. The use of ambassadors thus has a positive outcome in addressing a library challenge.

A more study by Setiawan (2024) examined the Library Ambassador Programme at the University of Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia. The study found that library ambassadors functioned as important intermediaries between librarians and students, helping to provide user support and promote library services. The research described ambassadors as "agents of change" who actively disseminate literacy-related information and encourage greater engagement with library resources. Furthermore, the programme contributed to improved service delivery and strengthened collaboration.

The University of Florida's Information Literacy Scholars Programme (2024) provides another contemporary example of a structured student-centred information literacy initiative. Participants underwent intensive training focused on discovering, evaluating, and ethically using information before completing research-based presentations. The programme demonstrated how sustained information literacy instruction can enhance students' research competencies, critical evaluation skills, and confidence as information users and communicators.

There is however a dearth in research about the ambassador programmes. Although not specifically focused on ambassador programmes, recent studies continue to demonstrate the impact of information literacy interventions on student learning. An example is the findings by Ahmed and Maharana (2024) who found a significant relationship between information literacy competencies and student engagement in university libraries, particularly in relation to critical thinking, information evaluation, and digital information use. Their findings suggest that students who develop stronger information literacy skills become more active users of academic information resources and services.

Similarly, Akor's (2024) review of information literacy programme assessment reported that information literacy instruction contributes to improved research skills, academic performance, self-efficacy, and long-term learning outcomes. The review argues that impacts should be measured not only in terms of skills acquisition but also through changes in confidence, attitudes, and academic behaviours. In this project it was thus important to gauge the NEET's information literacy competencies.

These recent studies provide a stronger and more current justification for your three objectives and demonstrate that evaluating the activities, challenges, successes, and impacts of Information Literacy Ambassador programmes remains an emerging research area.

Methodology

This study followed a qualitative approach. The justification for a qualitative approach was based on the need to find in-depth data. Qualitative research is inherently exploratory and inductive (Ngulube 2019). It is particularly valuable for examining and understanding the meanings individuals or groups assign to social or human issues (Creswell & Creswell 2018). In a qualitative study, data is typically gathered within the participants' natural settings, allowing for a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Ngulube 2009). Data analysis proceeds inductively, developing from specific observations to broader themes, with researchers interpreting the underlying meanings of the data (Creswell and Creswell 2018). According to Maree (2016), the core focus of qualitative research is to extract social meaning from data—understanding how people make sense of their experiences, contexts, and situations. Data in qualitative research often comprises field notes, audio or video recordings, and includes methodologies such as in-depth interviews, document analysis, participant observation, and ethnography to explore phenomena comprehensively (Ngulube 2019).

In this study, convenience sampling was used to select 22 NEET youth, chosen because they were part of the Science Shop. The training was conducted at the North-West University Potchefstroom Campus. Data collection was conducted at the community centres in the township where the NEET warlocated. Focus group interviews were conducted with the NEET who had attended the training. The focus group interview was recorded and transcribed. Data analysis proceeded inductively, developing from specific observations to broader themes, with researchers interpreting the underlying meanings of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings and Discussion

One of the key outcomes of the programme was the improvement of participants' information literacy competencies. Some of the quotes obtained from the NEET include:

“Skills set on what, where, how to find and appropriately use information for a specific reason”

“Knowing on how to get information and knowing how to use it

“Ability to find, organise and use communicate information in all its various formats.

Through structured information literacy training and engagement with librarians, the youth developed fundamental skills in identifying information needs, locating relevant information sources, evaluating the credibility and reliability of information, and effectively applying information to address educational, social, and personal challenges.

These competencies enhanced their ability to navigate complex information environments with greater confidence and independence. One of the NEET reported that:

“You are not certain enough or not more accurate that so reliable you have to find with research to check that it’s accurate by going through various channel to check if it’s accurate or not through thorough research”.

As a result, participants became better equipped to engage in lifelong learning and to use information effectively in their daily lives.

The programme enhanced the participants' capacity to make informed decisions based on credible and relevant information. Through exposure to a variety of information resources and information evaluation techniques, participants developed the ability to critically assess available information before making decisions related to education, health, climate change, employment, entrepreneurship, and other aspects of everyday life. Participants were asked how they were using the skills obtained from the training and they reported as shown in Table 1 that they used information searching tools to assist the community with:

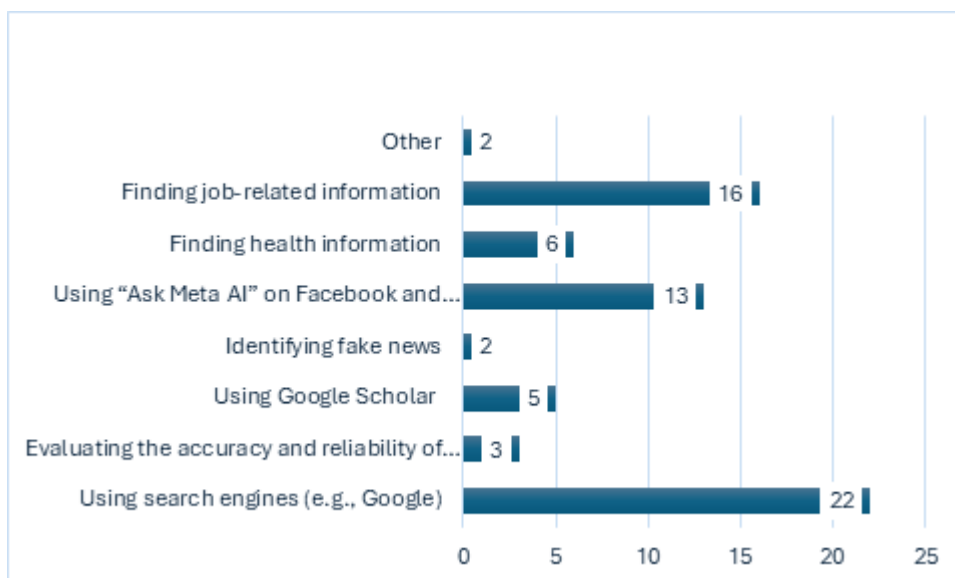


Figure 1: Using information literacy techniques in the community

The acquisition of information literacy skills contributed to improved problem-solving abilities and increased confidence in addressing challenges within their communities and personal environments.

The programme increased participants' awareness and utilisation of diverse information resources. The youth were introduced to a variety of open-access information sources, including digital libraries, online databases, institutional repositories, government information portals, and educational websites. Figure 2 presents the type of information accessed by the NEET after the training.

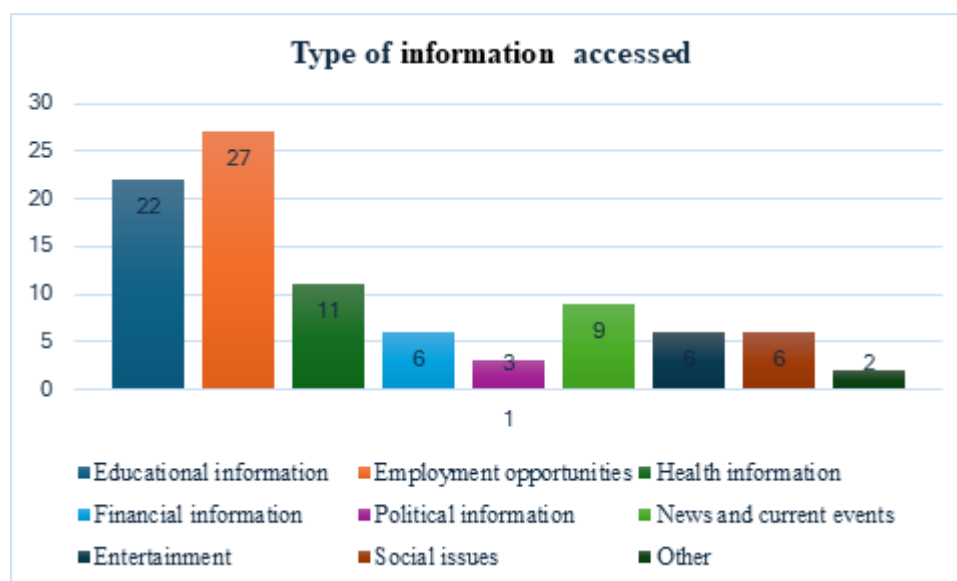


Figure 2: Type of information accessed

This exposure broadened their access to quality information and reduced barriers to information access. Participants demonstrated an increased ability to independently identify and utilize appropriate information resources to meet their academic, professional, and personal information needs. The programme strengthened participants' understanding of information ethics and responsible information practices. Librarians provided guidance on ethical issues related to information access, use, sharing, and creation, including topics such as plagiarism, copyright, intellectual property rights, privacy, and responsible digital citizenship. Participants developed greater awareness of the importance of ethical information behaviour and demonstrated an improved understanding of how to use and share information responsibly.

Furthermore, the programme enhanced participants' ability to recognize and critically evaluate misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. The NEET reported that:

- *Information is not taken for granted*
- *“opening my own soccer team to try decrease crime in the community”*
- *“It enlightened me about not what I see or hear about is not everything correct should find more information of what I want to pursue”*

In the context of an increasingly complex digital information environment characterised by information overload, participants became more discerning consumers and creators of information. This improved awareness of information integrity contributed to more responsible engagement with digital content and social media platforms.

The programme contributed to the development of critical thinking and digital literacy skills among participants. Through practical activities and engagement with diverse information sources, participants learned to analyse information critically, assess evidence, compare different viewpoints, and make reasoned judgments. These skills enabled them to become more effective users of digital technologies and information resources, while fostering a more reflective and analytical approach to information consumption.

At a broader level, the programme contributed to community empowerment by developing a group of information-literate youth capable of sharing knowledge and information skills within their communities. Participants acquired competencies that extended beyond the immediate objectives of the intervention, supporting educational advancement, employability, social participation, and lifelong learning. The programme demonstrated the important role of information literacy initiatives in empowering young people to become informed citizens who could actively participate in the social, economic, and digital development of their communities.

Despite the notable successes of the programme, several challenges were identified among the NEET youth trained through the Science Shop initiative. These challenges highlighted contextual and socio-economic factors that influenced the implementation and outcomes of the programme.

Language barriers emerged as a significant challenge. South Africa's linguistic diversity, with its 12 official languages, makes it difficult for the Librarians and participants to be proficient in all languages represented within communities. Furthermore, variations in dialects can affect communication and comprehension. For example, Setswana spoken in the North West Province differs in vocabulary, pronunciation, and usage from Setswana spoken in Botswana (Bagwasi 2019). These linguistic differences sometimes complicated training delivery and community engagement activities.

Limited digital literacy and access also presented a major obstacle. South Africa continues to experience a substantial digital divide, with many young people lacking adequate access to digital devices, reliable internet connectivity, and the skills required to effectively utilise online resources (Partridge et al. 2024). While public libraries are intended to bridge this gap by providing access to information and communication technologies, many libraries face resource constraints, including limited equipment, connectivity challenges, and high demand from users, thereby restricting access for some participants (Adedokun and Zulu 2022).

Another challenge was the varied educational backgrounds of the NEET participants. The cohort consisted of individuals with differing levels of educational attainment, ranging from those who had not completed secondary schooling to those holding diplomas and university degrees. Consequently, levels of comprehension, information

literacy skills, and training needs varied considerably, requiring facilitators to adapt content and teaching approaches to accommodate diverse learning requirements.

Finally, a perceived lack of confidence among NEET youth was noted. Many participants, influenced by prolonged unemployment and differing educational experiences, displayed low levels of self-confidence, particularly when engaging in group discussions, community interactions, and practical activities. This occasionally affected participation levels and required additional support and encouragement from facilitators to build confidence and foster active engagement throughout the programme.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated the value of information literacy training within the Science Shop model as a mechanism for empowering NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) youth and strengthening community engagement. The programme provided participants with essential information literacy competencies, enhanced their ability to access, evaluate, and use information effectively, and contributed to their personal and professional development. Furthermore, the project illustrated the potential of partnerships between higher education institutions, libraries, and communities in addressing societal challenges through engaged scholarship. The findings suggest that information literacy remains a critical life skill that can contribute to social inclusion, employability, lifelong learning, and active citizenship. The Science Shop initiative demonstrates that when information literacy is embedded within community-engaged programmes, it can empower vulnerable groups and create meaningful pathways for participation in the knowledge society.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen collaboration between academic and community libraries. Greater collaboration should be fostered between academic libraries and community/public libraries to support the development and delivery of information literacy programmes. Such partnerships can enable the sharing of expertise, resources, infrastructure, and training opportunities, thereby extending the reach of information literacy interventions beyond higher education institutions and into local communities.
2. Embed information literacy more effectively within curricula. Information literacy should be integrated across educational curricula rather than being treated as a standalone or supplementary skill.
3. Information literacy education should be introduced and systematically developed from the primary and secondary school levels. Early exposure to information literacy skills will better prepare learners to navigate increasingly complex information environments and reduce disparities in information access and use later in life.
4. Libraries, educational institutions, and community organisations should develop projects and programmes that demonstrate the practical application of information literacy in everyday contexts. Topics such as health information, financial literacy, job seeking, entrepreneurship, digital citizenship, and

community development can help learners recognise the relevance and value of information literacy in addressing real-life challenges. Address digital access and digital literacy challenges.

5. Further research is required to explore the long-term impact of information literacy interventions on the employability, empowerment, and social inclusion of NEET youth.

Acknowledgements

This study has been funded by the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) and the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa. The authors sincerely acknowledge their financial support, which enabled this research. The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the DSI or NRF.

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