

Academic Libraries in Africa

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An African proverb popularised by Chinua Achebe and Brooks (1994) warns that “until the lion learns to write, every story will glorify the hunter” and this emphasises the imperative of African writers as the marginalised to be proactive in writing and owning their own narratives not as victims by victors in a world divided into conquerors and victims. In the book *'Academic Libraries in Africa,'* the lions finally pick up the pen or should we say the keyboard. The book features African librarians, researchers, and scholars whose work reestablishes the story of academic libraries in Africa, rooted in lived experiences and local knowledge systems. This is a welcome, scintillating and intriguing contribution edited by Prof Maria Frahm-Arp, who held the position of Executive Director: Library and Information Centre at the time when this book was published at the University of Johannesburg. However, it should be noted that the content of the book is not limited to academic libraries as it also extends to community libraries. Furthermore, while we acknowledge the transformative nature of Africans in telling own stories, as LenkaBula and Ngoepe (2025) rightly observed, there is a tendency to perpetuate African scholarship as merely an appendage of Eurocentric methodologies, a situation exacerbated by imbibing Western theories, which may not be the solution to Africa’s grand societal challenges. Perhaps, there is a need for African LIS practitioners and scholars to unlearn, break free from the knowledge orthodoxy of the North and go back to their roots. This is so because this aspect of knowledge epistemological transformation is missing in the book.

Nonetheless, this collection includes thirteen chapters written by effulgent authors from various African nations such as South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Ghana and Uganda, and South Asian country Sri Lanka and Canada published by the University of Johannesburg Press. It centres on two principal themes shaping global library services: the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The authors share a collection of outputs, including case studies, empirical research, and literature reviews, illustrating how academic libraries in Africa are responding to the evolving community needs and challenges, such as literacy, information needs and access, open access and scholarship, technological advancements, marketing, awareness and visibility and post-pandemic pedagogical practices. Throughout the book, these themes come together like a thread of intellectual embroidery that keeps the discourse engaging, informative, analytical, and realistic as it articulates evidence-based experiences of libraries in the digital age.

The aphorism that libraries are the heart of communities still holds true, even amid constant technological advances, as libraries persist in being innovative hubs. Academic libraries worldwide continue to develop and enhance their services, resources, facilities, and spaces to meet the changing needs of their communities, and the African diaspora is no exception. Despite infrastructure and resource shortages, academic libraries in Africa find ways to adapt and evolve to remain relevant and competitive at the international level. This is also evident in how these libraries continue to write powerful stories by supporting the SDGs and serving their internal and external stakeholders. The findings from a study by Nsibirano and Nsibirano on urban vegetable farmers in Kampala exemplify how academic libraries can extend services beyond traditional university parameters. Their research confirmed that when farmers received scholarly and credible agricultural information from the university library, they successfully adopted improved farming practices. This proved that university libraries are not parochial ivory tower institutions that serve the interests of the elites, but in reality, they are pragmatic and community-centric institutions with the immense potential to transform society through contributing praxis-oriented solutions to enhance inclusive socio-economic development and food security goals. Through this practice, the university library applied an Ubuntu principle, which is expressed in one of the South African Nguni languages as “umuntu ngu muntu nga bantu,” meaning “I am because we are,” highlighting interconnectedness and shared humanity to ensure that those not directly affiliated can still access resources to improve their livelihoods.

Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. This adage effectively encapsulates the philosophy behind the literacy-focused chapters in this book. Nkomo and Ngoepe (p. 1) highlight that, despite Zimbabwean secondary school learners dedicating much time to social media, these platforms can also be used to encourage reading by offering downloadable novels and articles. Munzhedzi and Mukhwanteli's study (p.145), a piece of South African research, reveals that numerous university students lack basic library literacy. This stems from insufficient exposure to library access and resources during their schooling, which directly impacts their transition to university and their academic performance. Gbenu, Njagi, and Adegoroye's chapter links library literacy initiatives to SDG 4 thus positioning libraries as vital infrastructure for quality education and lifelong learning. Even though public libraries are the primary focus of this chapter, academic libraries and public libraries are inextricably linked because some public library

patrons are also connected to academic institutions. For example, students enrolled in Open Distance & E-Learning (ODEL) institutions, such as the University of South Africa (UNISA), utilise nearby public libraries, as evidenced by formalised partnerships between these entities (Gozo, 2016). Throughout history the public library has served as an extension of the university curriculum in a supplementary way by providing access to resources that support academic endeavors (Sharp, 1892; Peich, & Fletcher, 2015; Abumandour, 2021). These chapters collectively emphasise that fostering strong reading cultures and information literacy isn't merely about offering a service; it's a vital investment in empowering communities to become autonomous, lifelong learners capable of navigating complex information landscapes.

As universities around the world participate in global rankings, African institutions are also expected to take part, despite limited resources and infrastructure. Academic libraries in Africa play a strategic role in advancing their parent institutions' performance in global university rankings by strengthening teaching and learning environments through access to quality information resources and information literacy programmes. They actively support research environments and research quality by enabling scholarly communication, research visibility, citation impact, and open access publishing. The book comes at an opportune time when issues regarding the traceability and reproducibility of research have become topical in the global academic discourse and Africa is no exception to this trend. Furthermore, academic libraries enhance international outlook and industry engagement by ensuring information resources and facilities are in place to support global research collaborations, by supporting international staff and students, and by managing knowledge outputs that contribute to innovation, income generation, and patents. This is evident through chapters addressing open access and scholarly communication. Three of the chapters address the area of open access and scholarly communication. Onwukanjo's research on Nigerian postgraduate students reveals growing awareness of open access resources but highlights that students often lack systematic training in identifying quality sources and knowledge on how to avoid predatory publishers. Mwilongo and Kachota's literature review on Tanzanian institutional repositories documents both opportunities for increasing African scholarship visibility and challenges, including technical difficulties and inconsistent content submission. The editor recognises a significant limitation: while open access democratises research accessibility, article processing charges widen the publishing gap among scholars in the Global South due to financial constraints. The conventional maxims "publish or perish" and "self-archive and flourish" (Harnad, 2006: 12) are still uncontested as scholars continue to die in a society where they are compelled to publish behind paywalls, where their discoveries are constrained and not accessible to the public for free. Onwukanjo, Mwilongo, and Kachota's chapters serve as an intellectual superglue that analyses the opportunities and difficulties of the Open Access pathway in the changing terrain of library praxis and education and elevate Open Scholarship to the spectrum of evidence-based academic discourse. By bolstering the essential pillars to achieve accessibility, usability, sustainability, and equity, the chapters fervently promote open scholarship.

The COVID-19 pandemic altered the narrative by obliging academic libraries to embrace emerging technologies and this became the basis for open access as an alternative lifebuoy for widening access to information irrespective of time and space (Chisita, 2020). The chapter by Agye and Adu summarises the response of academic libraries to the COVID-19 pandemic through the adoption of disruptive innovations and their integration into academic library practices to increase service levels. The roles of academic librarians have also shifted; some have become redundant, while new roles have emerged, making upskilling, matching, and placement within these organisations unavoidable. Emergency remote teaching and learning has forced academic libraries to stand firm and embrace the new norm. The study conducted among Ghanaian academic libraries by Agyei and Adu (p.129) shares lessons on how many of the libraries surveyed fell short and were unprepared for online interactions, lacking infrastructure and staff competence, necessitating training and capacity building. This chapter clearly distinguishes between the residence of resource endowed and the lethargy of resource starved institutions that fell along the way in the age of disruptive technologies.

Additionally, Rupasinghe (p. 57) demonstrates how student-centered pedagogical practices can enhance engagement during asynchronous learning through virtual office hours. Amao-Taiwo and Ekpe-Iko's quantitative research (p. 159) found strong links between students' ICT skills and their online participation, emphasizing the need for ongoing training for both students and instructors. The chapter by Adie, Bisong, and Obuop (p.115) on offline internet solutions for low-resource settings offers particularly innovative strategies. They categorise offline internet options that support learning without ongoing data costs or reliable connections, providing practical solutions to infrastructural challenges. These proposed solutions, although primarily relevant and introduced during the hard lockdown periods of Covid-19, remain pertinent today.

It is true that the aphorism "when Muhammad cannot go to the mountain, the mountain will go to Muhammad;" (Bacon, 2000) teaches us that if the world cannot conform to your wishes in the true spirit of humility and when applied to librarians it emphasizes the need to be proactive to align services to the digital trajectory. The chapter that evaluates the use of digital media to raise awareness of academic libraries' services, resources, and facilities (p. 105) emphasises the need for agency in dealing with technical progress. To ensure these libraries are utilised to their fullest, a mechanism should be put in place to communicate the availability of tools, resources, spaces, facilities, and services. This chapter by Tsekea

and Chigwada brings into the limelight the need for libraries to establish policies to govern digital content management in sync with best practices.

This engaging collection presents a multi-country perspective that deepens comparative analysis by emphasising similarities and differences across different contexts throughout the continent. Most chapters, featuring empirical studies, provide evidence-based practices that can be adapted to various settings. Connecting library services to the SDGs illustrates a compelling story of how libraries have transformed themselves into agents of change.

As the book focused on addressing challenges prevalent in African academic libraries, it is our hope that in the future a companion version or new edition will explore insights into Afrocentric epistemologies, given the inherent challenges of the specific context. The unique challenges in Africa, compared to developed countries, present opportunities for discovering relevant and contextual remedial methodologies, thereby necessitating the application of Afrocentric practices and methodologies. George Ayittey (2008) coined the phrase “African solutions to African problems” There is a need for Afrocentric solutions to tackle the inherent challenges in African and the diaspora regarding how to enhance the visibilise research outputs. The UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science (2021) is aligned with the book's topics, such as open scholarship and academic freedom, as well as the challenges faced by scientists and other open science actors in many countries.

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