

Nigerian university libraries and the challenges of users' service demands in the 21st Century: what university administrators should know

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The article focuses on the challenges facing Nigerian university libraries in meeting users' service demands in the 21st century and the role of university administrators in assisting them in this regard. It identifies these challenges as non-application of technology to service delivery, increase in student intake with its attendant effect on the available limited resources, inefficient reference service, and competition from other service providers. The article recommends amongst others that knowledge and application of technology in service delivery in libraries is unavoidable in this century, quality service delivery in terms of selection and acquisition of appropriate materials should not be taken lightly, knowledge of human beings and human relationship is important, especially in reference service, library user education should be undertaken by library staff, staff training should be a continuous exercise, and university libraries should transform themselves into one-stop shopping centres for all information retrievals in the face of competition. The article concludes with lessons for Nigerian university administrators and advises that the administrators should fund the university libraries adequately and allow the university librarians to administer the fund without undue interference.

Keywords: University libraries; library services; Nigeria, university administrators

I Introduction

Universities are established to produce high level manpower to meet societal needs. This is achieved through the provision of intellectual leadership, pursuit, promotion and dissemination of knowledge through teaching, learning and research (Edoka 2000). The functions of the university give an idea of the purpose for which university libraries exist. University libraries play an indispensable role in the fulfillment of these functions. The university library is a service organization and its primary obligation is to provide the bibliographic or information services that are essential to the fulfillment of the university's mission (Ugah 2007). Its role encompasses the functions of other types of libraries.

A university library is both a collegiate and research library in its provision of library materials and collection in depth. It plays the role of a public library by serving the university community as a general intellectual and cultural centre. It is a school library in giving instructions to students for completing course assignments. It is a special library in meeting the specialized information and resource needs of students and faculty engaged in advanced research (Khanna 2008).

Therefore, the composition of university library users is wide and varied. It includes undergraduates of various age groups, postgraduate students, the faculty members, the non-teaching staff members or the administrative staff. There are also other users who are not members of the university community who patronize the university libraries. This class of users is composed of students and lecturers from sister universities or other higher institutions in the country as well as individuals from around the university environment. These users have varying service demands that they want to be met by the university library, and almost immediately.

Service demands are the services asked for or requests which users make of libraries as of right and with authority. These demands are met with designated activities in the form of services. Some of these service demands include reference services, circulation services, Information and communication technology services and user education services. These service demands pose serious challenges to the university libraries.

In this 21st century university library users face an information landscape that is radically different from what it used to be. The traditional concept of a library is being redefined from a place to access paper records or books to one that houses the most advanced electronic sources, including the Internet, digital libraries and remote access to a wide range of information sources. The users are faced with this electronic environment where the boundaries between scholarly information, popular sources and outright misinformation are blurred. As traditional resources (paper) migrate to on-line formats, it becomes more and more difficult for users to find and evaluate information effectively. This situation calls for a paradigm shift in the way Nigerian university libraries are meeting users' service demands. There is therefore, the need for university libraries and university administrators to help users do and win the battle in this chaotic information arena. This is the focus of this paper.

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2 Challenges of users' service demands in the 21st Century

The challenges of meeting users' service demands in this 21st century are outgrowths of those that began appearing at the close of the last century. What one sees now is a growth of them on a much grander scale and development at a much faster rate. The technology for information services has changed. So the ways university libraries have been meeting users' service must also change. The ways become that of acting as an intermediary between the users and the library collection, including those available in different formats. With the development of information technologies for information services, users want their information needs met in a timely and efficient manner. Therefore, university libraries are encumbered with the responsibility of dealing with issues of meeting these demands. There is also the cutting edge of many areas of technology. Online databases, not to mention Internet sites themselves, are proliferating in greater numbers. These call for users' ability to do more encompassing research. They also call for users keeping one step or more ahead in their uses and knowledge in order to be able to satisfy their information needs. Technology has not only transformed the process of information gathering, retrieval and dissemination but has also grown into almost unmanageable beastly proportion that overwhelms the users.

The increasing number of students' intake (Sofola 2009) in this 21st century into the universities both in the regular and continuing education is also a great challenge to Nigerian university libraries. This has effect on the number of staff to attend to the users, heavy use of collections, size of collection and the longevity of the information materials. The increase in students' intake has become one of the forces that shape the service delivery of university libraries, which must be managed so as to protect and maximize university library services.

In a time where change is pervasive, it is not a surprise that the tools used by reference libraries to answer patron's questions, and even the kind of questions and the way patrons ask are constantly changing. No matter the change, users demand to be provided with excellent information services. As the quantity of information increases and the quality varies even more widely, it is no easy task to imagine what reference service in the university libraries will look like, especially with the increased use of technology in meeting reference service demands.

Another challenge to the Nigerian university libraries in meeting users' service demands in this 21st century is the proliferation of information providers. Still noted for their organization and access to information, libraries face an increase in interest and competition from other information providers like the Internet cafés, bookshops, search engines, local video rental shops. Many Nigerians now visit these other information providers than libraries (Chiemeke *et al.*, 2007). As libraries compete more with these information providers, the many options for providing information and services to users need to be critically evaluated. These dramatically changing environments should force Nigerian university libraries to re-examine their future relevance and viability in meeting user's service demands.

3 Meeting the challenges of user's service demands in the 21st Century

The dramatic changes that are taking place in our society with regards to information technology, competition, increase in students' intake, changing nature of reference services have a direct impact on the ability of university libraries to provide viable and responsive library services to users. If the Nigerian university library is to meet users' service demands, it must make itself a magnetic force around which teaching, learning and research revolves. In so doing, Nigerian university libraries cannot simply react but must be proactive and entrepreneurial in the following activities.

3.1 Computerization

University library user population is rapidly changing as is the technology for serving them. Nigerian university libraries need to look at how they are serving their users and change their strategies in line with technology fever. They need to keep up with new technology. The library catalogue or index to the collection forms the base for most of the library activities such as acquisition, reference, bibliographic service, inter-library loan and so on. The users of library card catalogue will appreciate how fast the retrieval is in computerized environment. If the same system is available in network environment, users can have simultaneous access to the same database. With computerization, library operations are performed faster and accurately. This is a serious challenge to Nigerian university libraries which they must tackle if they are to meet their users' service demands in this 21st century. This is because we expect the 21st century university library user to be computer literate and who expects to be served using computer technology. Nigerian university libraries cannot afford to miss out in this globalization because the electronic revolution is touching the libraries in profound ways. Not only is it affecting the service demands, but also the service delivery. Nigerian university libraries should begin to develop information portals to provide personalized views of relevant information resources held internally.

3.2 Quality service delivery

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest and different approaches to quality in libraries and information services (Bitner & Amy 1994). A common factor in approaches to quality is the focus on user expectations and needs. The quality of service is in both the quality of service and the service providing it. Goud (2001) identifies the quality attributes

applicable to library and information services as performance in meeting its most basic purpose, availability of service, conformance (service meeting agreed standards), durability (service sustainability over a period of time), currency of information, serviceability (the level of help available to users), aesthetics (terms of physical library), and web-based services, perceived quality (users' view of the service provided), and usability, particularly relevant to electronic services. "Quality is the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bears on the library's ability to satisfy stated or implied needs" (ISO 11620, 1998). It also means the product's fitness for purpose, fitness for use, conformity to requirements and absence of defects (Wikipedia, 2005). Nigerian university libraries must meet users' service demands by maintaining quality products (information materials) and services. This is because users evaluate the quality of services received and decide when (or if) there will be further interaction with the library. Provision of user-focused services should be paramount, with delivery of resources for all user-groups becoming more customized to individual profiles, in what may be referred to as *just-for-you* services (SDI and CAS).

3.3 Selection and acquisition of appropriate library materials

This is one of the conditions that ensures that users' service demands are met. Who should decide on what should be selected is not a matter of concern here. What matters here is the concept of availability and accessibility. Selection of library materials is such an important operation in library practice that it should not be taken lightly. Nigerian university libraries should ensure that selection of collections adequately meets the library's objectives both in quantity and quality. In selecting library materials, appropriate assessment criteria must be followed. These include author's reputation, aims, relevance, accuracy, currency, scope and depth of coverage, style of writing, special features, format, audience, objectivity and cost of the information material (Ifidon, 2006). The importance of these assessment criteria derives from limited financial resources of Nigerian university libraries. It is when appropriate library materials are selected and acquired that these university libraries can boast of meeting users' service demands. There should therefore, be a commitment from the Nigerian university administrators to maintain an appropriate level of funding for acquisition and delivery of information resources to meet the needs of users.

3.4 Effective circulation of library materials and efficient reference service

The anchor of any library is to make acquired information materials available to users with minimum waste of time (Edoka, 2000). It is the responsibility of the Circulation Department of the library to make most of the information resources in the library available to users. The circulation of information sources to users in a timely and efficient manner makes it possible for the users to make efficient and maximum use of the materials provided by the library, thereby meeting the service demands and user satisfaction. According to Kuyoth (1979), the proof of good book circulation is that the user should be able to find the information material he wants at the time he wants it. Nzotta (1986) adds that:

The indispensability of academic libraries ... hinges on the fact that they provide the materials ... with which these institutions carry out their major functions of research, teaching and learning and social services.

In a situation where an information material cannot go round the users because of limited copies, such material should be placed on 'reserve' to enable every user have equal chance of accessing it. Otherwise, when the users, for whatever reason, do not utilize these materials provided by the library, ultimately the library has failed in its objective of meeting users' service demands.

Reference service in this 21st century will require an agile librarian who must be willing and able to assess and alter the reference area, the collection, policies, methods, attitudes or anything else in order to offer the most effective and appropriate service possible. He must be user-centred rather than library-centred. Those to be entrusted with reference service must have broad knowledge of paper and electronic resources and the ability to instantly choose the best, most appropriate sources and formats to answer each question from users. Because of the competition from 'expert' services on the Web, such as *Askanexpert*, *Ask Jeeves*, *Ask me*, reference services in the libraries must be proactive and resourceful. This calls for willingness and eagerness of reference librarians in Nigerian university libraries to learn new skills, new sources and keep their technological skills sharp. Staying current is a constant struggle, but the effort to do so must be a habit to reference librarians (Tennant 2000).

3.5 User education/orientation/awareness

User education involves the process of making library patrons learn how to make effective and efficient use of library resources and services. This is through the acquisition of skills in the identification, location, retrieval and exploitation of library resources (Uhegbu 2001). User orientation is designed to give new library users a general awareness of the library resources and the staff who are there to help with their needs. The need for user education/orientation becomes pertinent, considering the enormous size of the average university library presenting an overwhelming spectacle to most students especially those who had no interaction with libraries in their primary and post primary institution. When the staff of the university library teach, do reference work, create bibliographic guides and tools, and describe activities to

those outside the profession, they go to great lengths to eliminate jargons, simplify concept and treat library research as a simple and easy thing. When librarians are engaged in this, they do it for good reasons and with the best intention of meeting service demands. Nigerian university libraries must be involved in information literacy. The role of librarians as teachers should be fully realized. The research and information literacy skills imparted by academic librarians are what makes the time spent in the library worthwhile. Experience has shown that students understand the use of the library when the skills are taught by librarians themselves. So, for academic librarians to meet the service demand of user education and orientation, they should not withdraw to the libraries but must be out selling themselves and their services to the campus.

3.6 Staff orientation/training

In recent years, the need for public-service-orientated librarians has become increasingly important. In addition to housing books, journals, documents and other physical manifestations of the printed word, university libraries are now places to go to accomplish the task of accessing and sending e-mail, accessing online journals or databases, filling out interlibrary forms to acquire a book from another library, obtaining and photocopying course materials and acquiring training for software application. The university library has become a process in addition to being a place. Because information technologies will soon become common in Nigerian university libraries, librarians need all the necessary technical skills to provide assistance when something goes wrong with the sophisticated equipment. The most important quality of any librarian is a strong public-service orientation, and the willingness to get his hands dirty to resolve problems. For this orientation to translate to meeting users' service demands, it should be followed by the realization that workshops, training, orientation, and other forms of continuing education are another part of the job needed to keep skills current. These will enable them to have the right knowledge and skills needed to deliver user focused services in the most efficient and effective way.

3.7 Staff/user relationship

Library service should be relationship-driven between the users and the library. Whiteman (2001) sums up this relationship when he wrote that:

The attitude and role of staff members are keys to any service organization that values its customers. While the library has no choice over who its clients are, the library does control the selection of employees. For this reason it makes sense to hire staff who have customer service interest within the context of the vision and mission of the library.

Empathy, sympathy, patience, altruism and the ability to listen are some of the required qualities of an effective university library staff. Nigerian university library staff should be made to understand the following human relationships in libraries, if they are to meet the challenges of meeting users' service demands in the 21st century:

1. Users' assumptions about librarians and libraries
2. Supporting users' strengths and downplaying weaknesses
3. Reading body language
4. Listening skills and effective ways of replying to users' questions
5. Ways of managing the complaining or angry patron for the best outcome.
6. Best ways of making people with cultural differences or physical challenges feel they are being treated as well as other users, and
7. Creating an effective physical environment in the library (signage, placement of furniture and files, etc)

In addition, the university library needs input from and regular consultation with users to help inform decisions on development of appropriate services for them.

3.8 Operation time

The operation time of any service organization is very vital to the overall success of the university library. An increasing amount of time should be allocated to the students at all stages so that they will have enough time to carry out their research work in the library. Users find it difficult to complete their work and so their service demand is not met. It is therefore, imperative that to solve this problem "shift system" should be introduced in the university libraries, where this is not yet operational. This is a system where workers of the library are grouped to work for a number of hours and another group of workers take over from them. In this way, library users are not asked to leave the library because staff have overworked themselves and need to go and rest. In this way also, staff time is maximised. In fact, 24/7 opening hours should be provided to meet user demand for long opening hours.

3.9 Competition

The future of libraries can be simply summed up: *competition*. Libraries must understand the importance of a library's greatest commodity: *information*. While libraries have traditionally held a prominent place in the informational food chain, the explosion of information in recent years has made the efforts to harness it an insurmountable task. As the market for libraries is shrinking in this economic melt-down and competition is becoming fierce, Nigerian university librarians will have to possess most, if not all the characteristics of openness, friendliness, flexibility, patience, personal attention to users, communication ability and subject knowledge (ability to be a generalist). Furthermore, to make a difference with regard to the Internet as the premiere information provider, Nigerian university libraries should engage in knowledge management with the capability and technical know-how to transform themselves into one-stop shopping centres for all information retrievals. The university libraries as knowledge consultancies should help users navigate through and utilize the tremendous sources available through variant channels. By applying their knowledge and skills to screen and group information, academic librarians make the process of information searching more precise and efficient for their patrons, more than other information providers that are mostly interpersonal. The value of human touch is irreplaceable. Although library patrons can retrieve a wealth of information without librarians' assistance, often patrons are delighted to know that a caring human being was there ready to render services. With human caring base, librarians take different measures appropriate to providing information to the patrons than interpersonal information providers (Tan 2003).

3.10 Developing good customer service skills

Customer service skills in university libraries ensure that the users get better service in a happier environment. Good customer service rubs off on the patrons and the morale of the entire library. In short, developing good customer service skills is the best that can happen to the library staff, the users and the library. These customer service skills are demonstrated in such services as selective dissemination of information (SDI), current awareness service (CAS), bibliographic, indexing and abstracting services. Nigerian university librarians in meeting users' service demands in this 21st century should start demanding these skills in the people they hire and in the training programmes they develop.

3.11 Physical facility (building)

The university library buildings should retain its role as a place for independent and group study. With increase in students' intake, the building will be an important focus for study. It should therefore, permit optimal use of prime space, and enable access to secure, fit-for-purpose study environment. In this 21st century, university library buildings should provide users with areas for quiet study, group study, small group teaching rooms equipped with advanced teaching aids, plus areas for meeting colleagues to counteract isolation and for taking a break between periods of study. This ensures parity of access to collections and study space for all.

4 Lessons for Nigerian university administrators

One thing is very clear. The library is the heart of the university. The lesson from this paper is for Nigerian university administrators to know their role in helping the university libraries face the challenges of meeting users' service demands in this 21st century. The challenges are enormous and need tacking headlong. Nigerian university administrators must be on the vanguard of meeting these challenges by

1. Administering the policies adopted by the university Senate Library Committee,
2. Funding the libraries adequately. This means that university libraries' budgets should be released to the University Librarians and on time too. The university librarians also should be given free hand to administer the fund without undue interference,
3. Planning library service improvement and evaluating library service success and anticipating library's facilities and equipment needs, and
4. Developing personnel policies and practices that would achieve the overall goal of the library. Here, the University Librarian should be allowed to interview and recommend those he finds competent to work in the library.

When these are done, the university librarian carries out the library's mission by planning, co-ordinating, implementing and evaluating the provision of high quality services to the users in a timely and cost-effective manner. A university librarian of this character can meet users' service demands in this 21st century.

5 Conclusion

Nigerian university libraries are urged to think beyond their current non-technology practices to a changed world of technology and prepare students who will live in that world. A vibrant university library located at the centre of campus activity, assisting faculty to incorporate the new information rich world into their teaching, and preparing students for full

exploitation of the new resources and technology available in this information age could be said to be meeting the users' service demands in this 21st century, and this should be the objective of the university administrators planning to produce the graduates that will succeed as workers and citizens in this 21st century.

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