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Improving the Quality of Human Resources in Academic Libraries in Nigeria for the Digital Age: A Review of Competencies Requirements for Librarians

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Abstract

This literature based paper focused on improving the quality of human resources in academic libraries in Nigeria for more effective participation in the teaching and research process in view of the challenges posed by Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and its adoption for teaching, learning and other related activities. It examined the competencies expected and status of competencies possessed library professionals in academic libraries in Nigeria. The review of literature established that most librarians are deficient in the required competencies especially in the area of e-resources management, e-services development, full-text digitization and IT teaching skills among others. The paper also determined that much of the reason for these deficiencies can be traced to the weak foundation on which library education in Nigeria is laid. The paper recommended among other things that the library science curricular be overhauled to reflect more modern trends, and that librarians utilize both formal and informal continuing learning opportunities to update and maintain their competencies.

Keywords: *University libraries, academic libraries, librarianship education, ICT, librarian competencies.*

1.1 Introduction

Universities in Nigeria are increasingly incorporating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in learning and instruction. Many more are involved in outreach educational programmes using ICT facilities, and even more on developing institutional repositories in order to increase institutional visibility. As a result, there is a gradual shift from the old teaching methods as more emphasis is beginning to be placed on student-centred learning, and introduction of new learning and teaching approaches as practiced in more developed

countries (Virkus and Metser, 2004). These developments have created a need for a re-conceptualization of roles and responsibilities in learning and teaching processes as the library is expected to be more involved in the educational process (Virkus and Metzer, 2004). In essence, to ensure the survival and relevance of academic libraries in the digital age, there must be a shift towards increased “ease of effectiveness, efficiency, access, coordination and responsiveness in all aspects of our work-academic, ancillary and support” (Reuben, 2004).

In response to these changes,

university libraries in Nigeria are being equipped with ICT facilities that would enable them give more modern services to their user communities, and by inference get more involved in the educational process. Librarians are the vehicle through which this can be realized since the future of libraries depends on having librarians who are “adequately trained, knowledgeable and innovative” (Fields and Cossham, 2006). Consequently, the future of libraries in Nigeria will be guaranteed in the current environment if librarians possess the competencies that will enable them function effectively. A number of competencies which librarians are expected to possess in the digital age have been enumerated in the literature (Giesecke & McNeil cited in Mahmood, 2002; Khoo, 2005; Chiware, 2007). In view of this, it becomes necessary to carry out this study to ascertain the competency status among librarians in academic libraries in Nigeria with a view to determining how they can be positioned for library services in the digital age.

1.2 Objective of the Study

The general objective of the study is to ascertain the competency status among librarians in academic libraries in Nigeria with a view to determining how they can be positioned for library services in the digital age. Specifically, the paper will do the following:

1. Examine the impact of technology on academic library service provision
2. Examine the competencies required for library service provision in the digital era
3. Highlight the competency status of librarians in academic libraries in Nigeria
4. Consider avenues for acquisition of required competencies

2.1 Review of Related Literature

2.2 Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by the Quadratic

Usage Framework (QUF). This framework is normally applied to explain factors that influence the acceptance and usage of technology (Mardis, Hoffman and Marshall cited in Dulle, 2015). According to this framework, there are both technical and philosophical factors that affect technology usage. The technical factors concerning these are complementary of each other because existence of technology without the competence among the individuals who are to use it results in non use. Similarly, where the competence exists but the technology is lacking, there will not be avenue for applying the competence. Philosophical factors concern individuals' cultural and personal values.

In the context of this study, technology refers to the existence of the ICT media and resources that will enable libraries to access online information resources for teaching, learning and allied uses. Competence has to do with the factors that affect librarians' skills, education and experience which in turn impact on their ability to use ICT resources or access online information resources to serve their institutions. Cultural values refers to institutional or organisational settings and policies that will motivate librarians to use technology. For instance, if the institutional or library policy stipulates that information literacy must be a component of every course and should be taught by librarians, they will be motivated to comply. Personal values on the other hand has to do with individual librarians' preferences, beliefs, traditions, and trust that shapes their choice of whether to use or not use ICT and online information resources (Dulle, 2015). For instance, a librarian who is stuck in the traditional way of providing service will require a behavioral change to begin to use ICT and online information resources. The individual librarian will be willing to do the needful so as to position him or herself to use these by engaging in continuing learning opportunities.

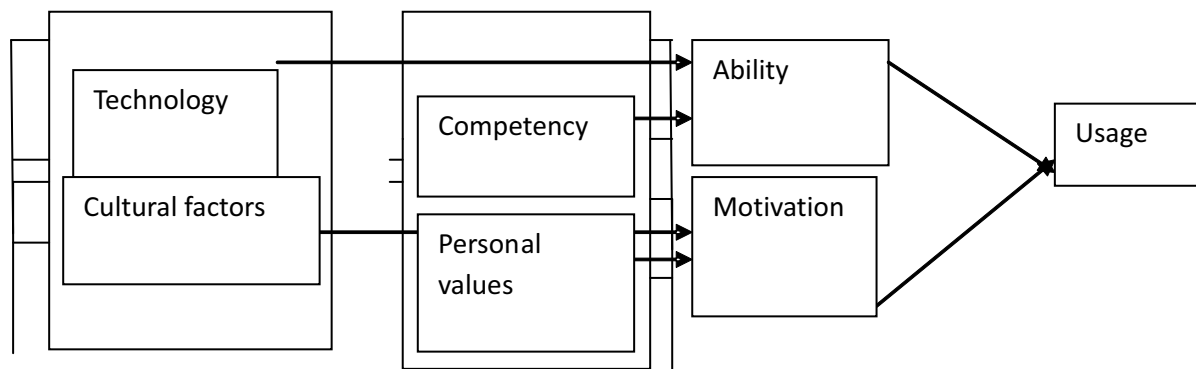


Fig. 1: Quadratic Usage Framework (QUF) (Mardis, Hoffman and Marshall cited in Dulle, 2015:48)

2.3 Academic Libraries and the Technology Challenge

The traditional model whereby libraries acquire, organize and provide access is changing with the pervasive influence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) on libraries and information services centres. This is especially because the advances in ICT mean that the idea of ownership and access to information is being redefined. Thus, it is no longer enough or desirable for libraries to pride themselves in their ability to stock information resources in one physical location with users congregating there for access (Tele, 2008; Dempsey, 2009). Furthermore, information formats are changing requiring that skills in handling them be acquired (McConnell, 2002). This is because information resources have gone beyond the print medium to include digital knowledge in the form of sound and images, multimedia, and virtual reality and digital information and this constitutes a present challenge to libraries (Duderstadt et al, cited in Zhang, 2004). This challenge entails that academic libraries shift their focus from collecting and archiving knowledge resources most commonly in written formats. Emphasis should rather be placed more on assisting scholars to navigate a vast array of digital knowledge resources scattered through cyberspace. Tele (2008) opines that libraries are becoming less important for the material

they collect or house. Invariably, the duties and responsibilities of libraries must change accordingly.

Along this line, CETUS cited in Virkus (1997) and Virkus (2004) are of the opinion that academic libraries can be relevant to their institutions and ensure that their communities function effectively in the current environment through the following ways: (1) Partnering with discipline faculty and other specialists for delivery of information and instruction, (2) Designing instructional programs for information access; (3) Teaching students and faculty how to access information, whatever its format or location, and how to evaluate what they find; (4) Serving as consultants on information resources, issues, and problems; (5) Developing and implementing information policy; (6) Selecting, organizing and preserving information in all formats, and (7) Serving as leaders and facilitators in introducing information technologies and ensuring their effective use.

The ability of academic libraries to evolve and succeed in the new roles will go a long way to determine their survival as an institution. To be able to provide the services required from them, academic libraries in Nigerian universities as elsewhere must key into the opportunities offered by the time (Hashim and Moktar; 2012; Anunobi and Ukwoma, 2009). But, academic libraries depend on librarians

to succeed in these new roles. Invariably librarians are not expected to be passive participants who merely serve as custodians of information resources. They are rather expected to be active participants in the creation, dissemination and utilization of knowledge. Librarians need to have the appropriate competencies if they are to function in these additional roles.

3.1 Competencies Requirement for Academic Librarians in the Digital Era

Hashim and Moktar (2012) rightly observe that changes are bound to come in the knowledge environment. As professionals, librarians will be affected by these changes. In the words of Creth cited in Hashim and Moktar (2012), “the values that are the foundation of the library profession should remain the same into the next century... values of service, quality, universal access...” However, while these skills are still relevant today, the present environment calls for a reassessment and realignment in the area of competencies because the ability of librarians to carry out their responsibilities successfully is largely dependent on the extent to which they possess and are able to use the required knowledge, skills, and attitudes, otherwise called competencies, in serving their communities. The Council of Europe cited in Mahmood (2002) defines competency as “the set of knowledge and skills that enable an employee to orient easily in a working field and to solve problems that are linked with their professional role.” One can say from this definition that competency defines job performance. Nobody can possibly function beyond his/her competency level.

Although different jobs and even within the same job, job positions may require different competencies yet, there are competencies which cut across within a given professional field. Khoo (2005) identify six core competencies namely traditional librarianship skills, such as cataloguing,

acquisitions, reference and information search skills. Others are value adding skills such as research skill and skill in synthesizing and packaging information to support clients' work and decision making. They also require IT skills; transferable and soft skills such as skills in communication, leadership, teaching and training and teamwork; appropriate attitudes, values and personal traits especially in the area of user orientation, service orientation and domain knowledge (subject knowledge) specific to the type and need of organization where they are employed.

A number of studies carried out in Nigeria and other African countries have also identified competencies which academic librarians should possess to enable them provide the services needed by their universities. However, the most mentioned seems to be competencies in the area of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Chiware, (2007) and Ibinaiye (2012) identify competency development in the area of e-resources management, e-services development, full-text digitization and IT teaching skills. According to Ajidhahun (2007) competency in computer manipulation, software management and information technology are important. Furthermore, Ekoja (2001) identify computer skills, database skills and Internet/communication skills while Omekwu (2006) identify competencies in the area of computer skills, IT literacy, IT competency and network capability. Librarians need these competencies to be in a position to play the roles and take up the additional responsibilities expected of them.

4.1 Status of Competencies among Librarians in Academic Libraries in Nigeria

No doubt, most developing countries such as Nigeria are yet to attain the technological height which more developed countries have attained. Yet, they are also

influenced by globalization of information and ICT. Irrespective of the level of use of ICT in the teaching and research functions of universities in Nigeria, it is expected that libraries should be in the forefront of ICT adoption and so assist in charting a course for their communities in that regard. However, literature suggests that librarians in academic libraries in Nigeria are rather deficient in most competencies required to enable them play the expected role (Oketunji, (2001), Omekwu (2006), Ajidahun (2007), Ekoja (2007). This is evident from the fact that it is not unusual to find that most IT positions in the universities and even in libraries are not filled by librarians (Ajibero, 1998). Ajibero further notes that even in the handling of IT projects, library management have been compelled to use the services of non-librarians who have very little knowledge of library requirements. In many cases, such projects have failed and have had to be abandoned for non-performance. Oketunji, (2001), Omekwu (2006), Ajidahun (2007), Ekoja (2007) and Chiware (2007) in their more recent studies note that although university libraries are acquiring more ICT infrastructure, this is not matched by skills development in the area. Fadehan & Ali (2010) have also reported the unimpressive picture of digital knowledge among librarians in academic libraries in Lagos in particular and Nigeria in general. Much of the blame for deficiency in required competencies is laid on the weak foundations upon which library and information science programmes in Nigerian universities are laid (Ajidahun, 2007).

In fact, Saleh (2012) observes that library managers complain of consistent weakness in competency levels of graduates of Nigerian university library schools evident in their low possession of skills needed for high level job performance in the technology environment. Ochogwu (1988) and Oketunji, cited in Ajidahun (2007) further attributes the lower standard of training of librarians in library schools in Nigeria to the fact that the

emphasis on training has largely been on traditional methods of information selection, acquisition, organization, retrieval and dissemination, mostly in print formats, rather than on information resources in electronic format, which is the new trend in information provision. The authors however agree that deficiency in competencies is not inherent in the librarians themselves. Moreover, most of these needs are felt in the course of practice. The alternative is that librarians in Nigerian universities must actively engage in continuing learning to fill the gap in training. Unfortunately, Varlejs (2008) point out the lack or limited opportunities for continuing professional development for librarians in developing countries. What this means is that librarians must explore avenues to improve on their competencies.

4.2 Avenues for Acquiring Competencies

According to Fagan and Wise cited in Lopez (2007), while initial training is important, its aim is to “provide an individual with the basic knowledge, theories, concepts and competencies needed to begin a career in a real life setting”. To avoid this and to have opportunities for continuing acquisition, update and maintenance of competencies, librarians have been urged to avail themselves continuing learning experiences to reinforce their formal education (Albritton cited in Shaugnessy, 1992).

Although librarians everywhere need to engage in continuing learning in order to maintain competence to practice, the need is all the more important for professionals in developing countries. This has been attributed to a number of reasons. Maesaroh and Genoni (2001) are of the view that librarians in developing countries frequently obtain a lower standard of qualification as first degree due to inadequate instructional equipment and expertise in the emerging technologies. In the view of McConnell (2002) the rapid advances in ICT mean that the shelf life of any initial

training is short, exposing the professional to the danger of professional obsolescence.

Avenues through which librarians can improve on their competencies have been suggested. These include formal sources such as institutions of higher learning, less formal sources such as professional associations and institutes, in addition to informal sources which are mostly opportunistic (Shaugnessy, 1992). Ramana (2006) lists the following: acquiring formal qualification; pursuing doctoral research; engaging in distance and e-learning courses; reading professional literature; undertaking tours and visits to well managed libraries; affiliation to professional bodies; attending professional meetings, conferences and seminars; presenting papers in conferences and seminars; writing papers in periodicals and books; participation in specialist groups; personal interactions with expert fellow professionals; attending workplace programs; attending induction programs; attending staff training and development courses; undertaking research and development projects; and using web resources. Dastgerdi (2009) categorized these avenues into two: intra-organisational and extra organisational. The intra-organisational avenues include informal relationships within organisations, meetings, organisational publications and intranets.

Others include remote education and electronic education, in-house activities such as on-the-job trainings, staff seminars, teaching, job rotations, scheduled visits to other libraries and information centres, mentorship, orientation and staff development activities such as study leave, secondment/ sabbatical and staff exchanges with other libraries. On the other hand, extra-organisational avenues include library website, in-service education, congresses, joint workshops and inter-organisational visits. The professional can also engage in informal self-directed activities such as reading, service on committees, participating

on listservs and communicating with colleagues (McDonnell, 2002). However, although informal activities are legitimate sources of acquiring, updating and maintaining competencies, the problem lies in the difficulty of tracking such activities. It is the responsibility of the professional to seek out relevant opportunities and utilize them in line with his/her need. The important thing to note is that librarians in academic libraries in Nigeria cannot afford to wait or solely depend on their institutions to provide all the continuing learning opportunities they need. Instead, they must be self motivated to discover and pursue learning opportunities within and outside their organisations. Care must however be taken that the opportunities which librarians choose to pursue are not based merely on availability or accessibility but on actual need.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The advances in ICTs have made it possible for universities to get more involved in outreach educational programmes, engage in developing repositories in order to increase institutional visibility, and also shift from the norm by placing more emphasis on student-centred learning. This requires that new learning and teaching approaches are adopted. ICT has also resulted in the production of information in alarming quantities, in varying formats and for people to access information both globally and locally at high speed. The expectation is for a re-definition of roles and responsibilities for information professionals as the traditional tools and methods of service are no longer very supportive of the new educational environment. Although the pace of these developments differ from country to country, yet academic libraries in Nigeria, as institutions established to support the teaching, research and learning activities of the universities must be positioned to become partners and active participants in the education process. This requires that

librarians re-define their roles and responsibilities as well as those of their various libraries. However, the literature points to the fact that most librarians in academic libraries in Nigeria are deficient in competencies needed to effectively function in the emerging society. Much of this blame has been laid on the weak foundation upon which library and information science education has been laid.

Recommendations

Following from evidence in the literature, the following recommendations are made:

1. The curricular of library schools in Nigeria should be overhauled to emphasize more on courses that will enable students acquire training on library skills for the digital environment.
2. Library schools in Nigeria should acquire the relevant ICTs that will enable them provide more practical trainings for students. Following from this, they should employ teaching staff who are knowledgeable in ICTs.
3. Library managements, after due training needs analysis; should provide more continuing learning opportunities for their staff to update and maintain their competencies
4. Librarians should be committed to seeking out and utilizing continuing learning opportunities for enhancement of their competencies.
5. Librarians should be proactive in their communities by getting more involved in the teaching and learning process.

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