

THE ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN IN A DEVELOPING SOCIETY: challenges and prospects of retooling academic libraries.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: attempts to highlight the challenges encountered by academic librarians in developing countries, in this case Zambia, in their endeavour to implement change management in the provision of efficient and effective information systems to their clients.

Methodology: A sample of four academic libraries, namely, the National Institute of Public Administration (NIPA), Evelyn Hone College of Applied Arts and Sciences, the University of Zambia (UNZA) library, and the Zambia Institute of Accountancy Studies (ZCAS). These libraries present a 66.6% of the total membership of academic libraries in the Zambia Library Consortium (ZALICO). Questionnaires, interviews and literature survey were used for data collection.

Findings: Revealed that limited arrangements for networking, poor conditions of service, poor and inadequate infrastructure in terms of buildings and equipment, low qualifications of personnel, poor flow of information between the library and other academia, limited availability of computers, low usage of electronic resources and poor funding were the main challenges facing these libraries.

Originality/Value: Summed up in one major challenge, that of effectively and efficiently providing valuable information to the clients. An academic librarian is

not only a custodian of information needed for passing examinations, but also for research purposes. The modern librarian needs to become proactive in terms of information retrieval through the internet and other information sources.

Keywords: academic library, librarian

Paper type: View Point

INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps the challenge of change management that has necessitated the need for academic libraries in the third world to come out of their cocoon and endeavor to move with the rest of the world in information management. Third world academic libraries are not 'islands' in the information world. There is need to move with the rest of the world in the provision of quality information. As stated by Australian born voluntary librarian (Partridge, 1988), "we have to come into the world of technology sometime, otherwise we shall be left behind by the big countries." The academic library has traditionally been seen as a custodian of books and journals for the academia but the challenge that is arising out of globalization and information technology is that the third world academic library has to provide up-to-date information which will benefit the clients both now and in the future. The librarian is challenged to be proactive and not sit and wait in the library for clients' requests. Academic institutions have become a hive of activity in terms of research in all areas of life such that the librarian is kept 'on his toes' and has to either know where to refer the client to for the information needed, or provide it. "Besides the traditional functions of research and teaching, the third major task of (academic libraries) is now seen as dissemination of knowledge to society including the general public." (Cotta-Schönberg, 2005). The librarians' task has broadened with added responsibilities placed on him by the demands of the diverse research needs of the clients. The librarian is challenged to be open-minded and responsive to queries while knowing how to satisfy the information

needs of the client. A lot of topical issues including information on HIV/AIDs, terrorism, environmental matters, politics and sport will be brought to the librarians' attention. How equipped is the librarian to handle these diverse queries without disappointing the clients?

Much as each individual library surveyed has their own unique features of information provided to the users depending on the type of courses provided, there are a lot of similarities in the challenges being faced.

CHALLENGES

Poor and inadequate Infrastructure

The fact that Zambia is a third world country with its own economic challenges has not spared academic libraries. As mentioned by journalist (Sinjela, 2006) "among variables cited as contributing to the lack of a reading culture in Zambia is poor infrastructural facilities which are evident by dilapidated libraries...". (The Fifth National Development Plan, 2006) goes on to say that "the challenges that face the infrastructure system in Zambia include...poor state of infrastructure,. and low funding levels for infrastructure rehabilitation". The old infrastructure of the three academic libraries from NIPA, UNZA and Evelyn Hone, built in the late 1960's, after Zambia gained her independence, prove a challenge in terms of upgrading and putting new systems in place as they were not built with provisions for installation of these technological systems in mind. The libraries in these, and other institutions are in a state of disrepair with some having the problem of 'leaking ceiling collapsed in recent heavy rains' as ably documented by BBC correspondent (Matheson, 2000). In order for these libraries to function as effective and efficient information providers, installation of modern systems is needed.

Another point to note is that when these libraries were built, they were meant to cater for a limited number of users as courses offered then were few, but as years

have gone by, with the introduction of new courses and the increase in enrolment numbers, these libraries have become too small for the growing number of users. For instance, when NIPA was built, the library was initially meant to cater for a maximum of 80 users but as of 2007 first semester, the library registration records indicated that a total of 1, 236 clients had registered to be library members. From UNZA library registration records, a total of 2, 564 students had registered in the first semester of 2007, but the library was initially built to cater for a maximum of 1000 students. Evelyn Hone college library equally has a challenge in student numbers as it was initially built to cater for 150 students but as of the first semester 2007, the records showed a total of 1, 763 registered members. But as academic libraries with the job of insuring information provision, clients need not be turned away as they are pursuing courses at these institutions. The puzzle is that with this scenario how can librarians strive to adequately assist the large numbers of clients with their research and other information needs that will sufficiently assist them? At the end of the day, the librarian wants to assist the students so that they do not turn out to be 'half-baked' graduates but ones who will broaden their minds and articulate current issues with understanding to assist in national development. The situation needs a concerted effort because graduates who can not adequately carry out research will find it difficult to easily articulate on issues as they will not have current information at the 'tip of their fingers'.

Poor reading Culture

A lot of reasons have been given as to why this trend of a poor reading culture has continued even after years of being sovereign nations with good education systems in place. One reason Ugandan journalist (Jamesa, 2004) gives is the "inability to purchase books." Even if reading has been identified as helping develop the mental capabilities of an individual, poverty and unemployment levels in developing countries are aggravating this situation by hindering a lot of people from acquiring personal books, such that any money one may earn would instead go to buying food and other necessities. Buying books is regarded as a luxury.

Thus the students and academia all fully rely on the provision of materials from the library. The other reason is that most often people just read to pass examinations. A Zambian magazine journalist (Wishimega, 2006) observes that “the reading culture in Zambia is very poor, people don’t read for enjoyment, they do so because they are required to; it might be because of examinations or something like that.” The other reason is the introduction of alternative entertainment in form of Television and cinemas which are seen to be better ways of spending one’s time. “The revolution of the television era had to some extent hindered the progress of reading not only in Zambia and Africa but the world over (Mwendabai, 2007).

Poor conditions of service

Up until the 1990s librarians holding BA degrees, running academic libraries were not put on the same salary scale as other professionals with the same level of qualifications. The library was not even considered important enough to be a department but rather a unit under another department, either Administration or Research. An organizational structure from a report done by (Prendergast, 1988), librarian at Institute of Public Administration in Dublin, for the National Institute of Public Administration (NIPA) noted that the “library was a unit reporting to the deputy principal”. In the report, a recommendation was made to “raise the status of the library to a level which at least recognizes that its input to the educational process is equal to that of the academic departments”. In this way the librarian would not only be able to liaise on a departmental platform but the remunerations which go with the position would be a motivation in the delivery of services. There is a perception that good results on students’ performance in terms of pass rate percentages should only be attributed to the academic staff while overlooking the complementary services through research and information provision from the library.

Staff work long hours to keep the library open to users but the remunerations for working overtime often do not go with this sacrifice due to constraints in the budget line. While ZCAS does not operate after hours, NIPA, Evelyn Hone and UNZA libraries indicated that they give their staff days off to offset overtime pay. But the question that arises is, how motivating is this to the staff? All the staff interviewed regarded this as a de-motivating factor in their execution of duties. Much as they need to rest, if this situation is given prominence over giving them overtime pay, the staff would be de-motivated to a point of poor service delivery.

Low qualifications of library staff

The introduction of ICT in these institutions has yet again brought another need in the service providers. The library staff have generally been trained to run the 'traditional library' and once these facilities are introduced, the need to retrain the staff arises. "In order to instruct end-users, librarians themselves need to be trained in how to access, search and interpret different databases" (Paris, 1996). A librarian who does not fully understand how to operate the automated catalogue, a photocopying machine or use the e-resources, may shun availing those services to the users lest they notice his/her ignorance. The level at which one is competent enough to take full advantage of these resources will depend on how much training one has undergone. (Paris, 1996) goes on to say that "the challenge is placed before tertiary institutions and other academic alliances to respond to the training and continuing education needs of the academic librarians by transforming themselves in the way they operate". Therefore, in order not to under-utilize these resources, it becomes imperative to train the staff in the managing of the new technologies introduced so that they align themselves to the needs of the users.

Poor Funding

Zambia is rated as one of the poorest countries in the world (UN Human Development index, 2006). Since the 1960's when most of the African countries gained their independence, there have been deliberate policies to provide free

education to their citizens. Contributions from international organizations like the Ford Foundation were made with an emphasis to develop academic libraries which were built. A case in point is the NIPA library law section which was commissioned in 1974 using donations from the Ford Foundation. The other contributions to various countries which helped boost library collections in the 1980s were made by the Andrew Carnegie foundation. (Partridge, 1988).

One will, however, notice that much as the government welcomed this assistance, the general reading culture of the students and members of the community at large continued to be poor or almost non-existent. Students continued to read only recommended textbooks for them to pass their examinations. With the wave of the advent of information technology in the late 1990s to Africa and Zambia in particular, a lot of higher institutions of learning have been challenged to revamp their libraries to provide accurate, up-to-date and timely information to their clients. Much as there has been a deliberate policy in provision of both print and electronic information resources, finance has remained a major hindrance to current information sources. Old, tattered books are still found on the shelves of all the four surveyed libraries. Reason? There is no resolve to weed as it would mean the shelves being left almost empty.

Implications of exchange rates

Computers are very expensive to acquire due to fluctuations in the exchange rates and weak buying power of the Kwacha (local currency). NIPA and Evelyn Hone College had budgeted for the purchase of computers in 2006. Their allocations were for purchasing of 10 and 5 computers respectively but only managed to buy 5 and 3 computers by the end of the year. This was attributed to the fluctuation in the exchange rate as it became more expensive to acquire the same number of computers as the local currency had devalued. It is very expensive to subscribe for a line to connect to the internet and most often connectivity is very slow and the servers often down adding to the frustration of the users. Sometimes,

convincing management on the need to acquire these important tools is an uphill battle due to different priorities of the parent institutions. For example in 2005, the budget line for purchase of library books at NIPA was channeled to buying of classroom chairs and desks. The four libraries have a ratio of 1 computer to 50 clients, making it difficult for staff to satisfy the demand. Ultimately, one may not really blame the clients for not fully utilizing these resources.

Reasons for poor funding

The question that arises therefore is, what has necessitated poor funding for academic libraries? First and foremost, most institutions are self-financing and priority is usually given to other needs like salaries and other administrative issues. The 'dollarisation' of the world economy has also contributed such that when a budget line is made for library resources for that particular year, the strength of that amount as the year progresses will depend on how the local currency will fair with the dollar due to fluctuations in the exchange rates. For every transaction made, "the amount may seem very large when translated into Zambian currency but it must be remembered that most of the books and journals required for the library are published abroad and must be imported," (Prendergast, 1983). For example, NIPA, ZCAS and Evelyn Hone College libraries indicated a budget line of between \$10 000 to \$20 000 dollars annually. At the time of budgeting in December 2006, the exchange rate of the Zambian Kwacha to a dollar was K3,500. In February 2007, the Kwacha had depreciated to K4,400. This in essence means that a number of adjustments to the budget have to be made in order to meet the deficit in the financing requirements for the subscription or importation of the required materials.

What then is the way forward regarding the librarians' standing up to these challenges and making use of the available facilities while striving to better provision of services?

TRADITIONAL OR MODERN?

In the book 'Management', (Bartol, 1998) professor of organizational behavior gives four reasons as to why people sometimes resist change, these being self-interest, misunderstanding and lack of trust, different assessments of the virtues of the change and lastly low tolerance for change. Change will generally be met with resistance in whatever form it is introduced. When people are used to a certain way of life or doing things, it is a big challenge for the advocates of change to convince the people, even when it is for their own wellbeing. "A story is told of one International Non-Governmental Organisation which saw a need of building modern pit latrines in the eastern part of Zambia where the locals rear pigs. They built a pit latrine for each household and after completing the exercise, left. When they went back after one year to evaluate as to how useful these latrines had been in assisting the locals keep their surroundings clean, they found that no one had ever used them. Quizzed for an explanation, one old man stood up and said, "Young man, if we go and relieve ourselves in the latrines, what will our pigs eat?" From this example one can see that it is very important to first find out what the intended recipients of your products need so that it is packaged accordingly. (Partridge, 1988) notes that "The basic problem in getting new ideas implemented was one of educating them". (Bartol, 1998) gives some strategies for overcoming resistance to change and one such is education and communication. In this instance this strategy would be best suited as it concentrates on the needs of the clients. (Benson, 1995) states that, "as attitudes toward the use of automated systems change, so must the roles of academic librarians". Only then can the reason for change be appreciated and correctly implemented. In this case, if our users have been used to the 'book only' tradition of research, the advantages of the introduction of e-resources including automated catalogues systems has to be explained and demonstrated to them in order for them to appreciate these upgraded services. As (Jain, 2006) explains, "due to the ever-changing

technological advent, academic librarians are constantly challenged to serve their customers' knowledge needs time and cost effectively." The need for orientation programmes specifically targeted at specific needs of each category of customers is paramount if the services are going to be fully appreciated. As confided in the writer, most of our senior academia and other users are still 'computer shy' and would not want other users to notice their ignorance. So, instead of group orientation programmes, the library staff at NIPA introduced one on one tutorials which proved very effective. The other initiative taken was the selective dissemination of e-journal alerts. E-mail addresses for all staff, including and their subject areas of interest, have been collected by the librarian so that whenever a new journal article of interest to a particular staff is published, this information is sent to the respective staff who can access it from their respective offices and in turn disseminate that information to the students. The other initiative introduced by UNZA and NIPA was to register the Internet Protocol (IP) addresses for all the computers in the institutions including the computer laboratories so that students and academia are able to access the e-resources from these places since the library has limited space and computers. It has been observed and realized that once the academic staff appreciated the information given to them, then it would definitely be equally passed on to the students.

It is equally important for the librarian to be in constant touch with other departments to get feedback on their needs. Introduction of new courses or change in the curriculum needs to be communicated in order for library staff to align themselves with the needs that arise out of these changes. Of the four institutions surveyed, Evelyn Hone and UNZA indicated that the librarian is a member of the Board of Studies which gives him/her first hand information on any curricula changes. "Librarians can liaise with their academic partners and other customers to select appropriate information resources and organize them in most accessible way to make them readily available when required. This partnership of librarians and academia will transform librarians' status from service oriented to

value-oriented”(Jain, 2006). In this way the information provided will be collectively appreciated by both the academia and other users as they would have taken an active role in identifying their needs.

PROSPECTS

Infrastructure Improvement

Without good modern infrastructure, the provision of services is not fully appreciated. This is so because the ICT infrastructure would only be installed in a given environment which is conducive for it to last long. In the strategic plan for NIPA, a modern library has been earmarked to be built in 2007 using local resources as management has seen the importance of information provision in relation to the quality of graduates being produced. The bandwidth of the three libraries namely ZCAS, NIPA and Evelyn Hone college have been broadened so that research and e-resource usage is done more efficiently. Even with the few available computers this is a welcome development as users would be able to research at a faster rate and give opportunity to their colleagues.

Training of librarians

It is imperative that librarians are trained in modern information management systems in order for them to provide adequate services to the clients. It is gratifying to note that all the surveyed institutions indicated the fact that their institutions had deliberate training policies for their staff whenever a need is observed. After one has attained a certain contract period, they are able to be sent for higher training provided their superiors see the need of such. At the time of this survey, NIPA had sent one certificate holder staff for a diploma programme while UNZA had sent two staff for degree levels. The diploma and degree levels are offered at universities and colleges within the country while the Masters level can only be pursued out of the country.

The other training has been offered by the Zambia Library Association (ZLA) which has been carrying out workshops in conjunction with the Zambian distributor of WINISIS and the now current GENISIS database systems to up-grade and sensitise its members on the need for improving their information retrieval system. A deliberate policy by these institutions in the retraining of staff was indicated in the survey. (Paris, 2006) librarian at University of Western Cape also remarks that 'It is our responsibility as well as those of employers to ensure that the knowledge base and expertise of information workers is kept up-to-date.' This has been necessitated by the fact that the provision of e-resources, even with the few available computers in each of these libraries has made it imperative to have their staff retrained. (Prendergast, 1987) in her report observed that, 'in Zambia, frequent contact with libraries and other organizations outside the institute is very important for library staff.' Short tailor-made training courses have been carried out by INASP in conjunction with the University of Zambia (UNZA) to assist the consortium members in their training needs in research skills of e-resources. The need to stream-line the searching of information from these resources is in itself very important so that one does not get lost in the maze of information available. To avoid frustrations, due to information explosion, on the part of the user in getting the information required, the librarian should be able to package information according to the needs of the users. Librarians as professionals need to come together and form associations which will foster their intellectual needs. It is mainly through these fora that exchange of knowledge will be promoted for the development of the profession both on an international and local level.

Funding

Much as foreign exchange rates may prove a challenge, however, the four libraries have indicated their employer's will to apportion higher budget allocations for use in the libraries in their 2007 budgets. As competition rises, it has become imperative to upgrade services offered in the libraries to come to internationally acceptable standards in provision of information. (Okon, 2005) a lecturer in the

department of educational technology and library science at the university of Uyo ably noted that, "Library and information center managers have the responsibility to provide effective and efficient but relevant information to their users". The provision of low-cost editions of books relevant to the current scholarly needs of the students has assisted the Librarians in managing to stock these books without spending too much money on purchasing them. These low-cost editions are affordable and readily available even with the local bookstores.

The librarian should also be creative enough to provide chargeable services that will assist in the generating of finances in the library. Photocopying and printing facilities, internet cafés, binding and laminating services are some of the services that have been introduced in these libraries to raise funds for the day to day running of the library.

Networking

Institutional co-operation (locally)

There is always room for improvement in all areas outlined above. The starting point in solving a problem is to identify it. Managements of these institutions have a political will to better their services. With the privatization process introduced in 1992 after the Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) government was elected into power, the NIPA and Evelyn Hone College which directly fell under government ministries were hived off to run as separate entities with no grants from government. With the liberalisation of the economy, new privately owned academic institutions like ZCAS mushroomed through out the country. These institutions have realized that for them to survive with this new development, they need to revamp the general outlook of their institutions, introduce new profitable courses to compete with new privately owned institutions which are offering similar services with better facilities and competitive conditions of service for their staff. They realized that there is need for them to pull resources together and redeem the situation in order to compete favourably on the world market, hence the formation of the Zambia

Library Consortium (ZALICO). The formation of this consortium has assisted in the accessing of subsidized e-journals under the INASP-PERI (International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications)-(Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information) project.

This concept of resource sharing stems from the understanding that no single library is capable of having all the resources its clients needs, even in situations where such libraries have adequate book budgets or space to store their materials. Where one institution may have found it practically impossible to subscribe for these e-resources, it is now affordable to subscribe for e-journals as this is being done at a cost-sharing basis. There is need to strengthen consortium so that it realises its mission of "acting as a catalyst for leading, supporting, motivating and championing resources for library and information users in Zambia". (ZALICO brochure, 2006). The other objectives of the consortium is to collectively source for external funding in areas of Information Communication technology (ICT) and form a network of information provision to the respective users.

Institutional co-operation (International)

A lot of strides have been made to partner with institutions on an international level to broaden the information base of the local academic libraries. A case in point is the NIPA library which has partnered with Webster University for the provision of current relevant books which are sourced from the Netherlands and NIPA only pays the shipping costs. This arrangement has boosted the library resources at a very subsidized cost as the amount spent on paying for shipping costs is not even half of the amount that would be spend on purchasing the books. Evelyn Hone college reported that they have received 5 free computers from Irish AID which, although not enough, have helped alleviate the shortage of this facility.

CONCLUSION

With the introduction of new technological changes, it is imperative that the academic librarian in the third world is empowered to provide services which will help develop not only the intellectual capabilities of the academia and students but also contribute positively to research issues touching on the very existence of our economies. Only then will the contribution of the academic librarian be looked at positively as it will help foster economic development of the country.

Recommend that academic libraries be affiliated to international and local institutions like the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) and ZALICO for networking purposes, funding for library budget be increased to facilitate acquisition of current materials and equipment, library staff should be retrained in new Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). There is a lot of room for improvement.

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