

ADAPTING ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

Academic libraries are integral components of educational institutions, catering to the diverse needs of faculty, staff, and students. Their mission aligns with the broader objectives of the parent institutions, encompassing support for teaching, research, and learning. This multifaceted role extends beyond immediate academic pursuits, fostering lifelong learning and contributing to national development. Hybrid in nature, these libraries curate and provide access to a wide array of resources, including both traditional books and non-book materials. The academic library, often deemed the heart of higher education institutions, profoundly influences the quality of graduates. This paper explores the pivotal role of academic libraries, their diverse functions, and their influence on institutional excellence, highlighting the crucial nexus between libraries and quality education.

Keywords: Academic libraries, higher education, information resources, national development, quality education.

Introduction

Academic libraries serve the teaching, research and learning needs of lecturers, non-academic staff and students. Academic libraries are established to achieve the objectives of the institution that owns the library. It also plays a major role in providing information for lifelong learning and access to information for national development. Most academic libraries are hybrid libraries as they stock book and non - book materials for their users (Owoeye & Ali, 2017). Academic library is the heart of any institution of higher learning (Oduagwu, 2006). Academic library is the pivot on which institutions of higher learning revolve and the nature or state of the academic library is a parameter for measuring the quality of graduates of institutions.

Corona Virus popularly known as COVID -19 started in Wuham China in December 2019. On the 31st of December 2019, World Health Organisation (WHO) was formally notified of a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuham, China. By January 5, 2020 there were 59 cases. Ten days later World Health Organisation was aware of 282 confirmed cases of which four were in Japan,, South Korea, and Thailand (Chaplin,2020). This pandemic which has ravaged the whole world has resulted in the death of thousands of people worldwide. It has also resulted in the lock down (closure) of schools, manufacturing and business activities globally. This pandemic has caused huge loss of human and material resources. Although the doors of most libraries are locked, services are expected to be provided to users in view of the role of library as “fuel for development and the life wire of societies”. This implies that academic libraries in Nigeria and other

developing countries must look for proactive ways of providing services to their users during this period the world is ravaged by corona virus. Through the use of ICT and other innovative services, users can gain access to information resources in the library (Simisaye, Salisu & Awodoyin, 2018). American Library Association, (2020) recommended the closure of libraries for the safety of both library staff and library patrons.

IFLA, (2020) recommended that irrespective of the measures adopted by various countries – business as usual, restrictions, close of libraries – library staff should stay safe through abiding by the rules and regulations of World Health Organisation like social distancing, washing of hands with soap, use of hand sanitisers, use of nose masks and general cleanliness.

Most academic libraries provide traditional library services, although they claim they are hybrid libraries. The point is that no matter the type of services provided by libraries effort should be made to use simple ICT skills to provide services to users at home.

The truth is that libraries in Nigeria and other developing countries are not working this period but the Suggestion here is that they can provide skeletal services to their users through the use of ICT facilities.

Objectives of the Study:

The objective of this study is to recommend types of proactive services that can be provided for users in time of corona virus pandemic.

Methodology:

This paper is a position paper that is recommending proactive services that can be provided to users in time of pandemic.

Services that can be provided by Libraries during COVID – 19 Pandemic:

Health professionals have explained to people, the danger associated with close contact among people, touching of items including books, use of public facilities without effective hand washing and general cleanliness. This implies that one of the major ways of providing services to users in the midst of deadly corona virus pandemic is through the provision of online services. Academic libraries are therefore expected to make use of online services to reach their library patrons. The libraries are expected to provide information to users through their laptops and Android phones. The online information could be disseminated to users through the social media, text messages and email. These are proactive ways of disseminating information in developing countries where the infrastructural facilities are lagging behind. Academic libraries can provide information literacy services. This service helps the library users to learn how to make effective use of information materials available in the library. Information literacy helps users to obtain information for lifelong learning and knowledge for contributing to national development. In other words, information literacy helps library users to obtain information that will enable them contribute meaningfully to policy making and decision making. Academic libraries can also provide document delivery services, selective dissemination of information and interlibrary lending services (Du & Evans, 2011). The libraries can deliver these services through email, telephone chat, text messages and the use of social media. Academic libraries are expected to provide translation services and repackage information materials to suit local needs of the users.

Academic libraries can also provide online business support services for start-ups. The citizen's especially young graduates from universities and other institutions of higher learning should be armed with solutions to uncertainties and economic meltdown that will be experienced after the corona virus pandemic. The academic libraries can equip young school leavers and graduates with feasibility studies, business plans,

how to become entrepreneurs, how to start new businesses etc (Simisaye, Salisu, & Awodoyin, 2018). These services will help those who may lose their job after the pandemic to find something to do to keep body and soul together.

Blogging and web design services could be provided. These services could help academic libraries to provide relevant information to their patrons. Blogs could be used innovatively to encourage entrepreneurial ventures. Academic libraries can also design websites for small scale businesses and charge small fees for their services (Maloney & Kemp, 2015). The libraries could also provide proactive chat systems and podcast services. Podcast which is digital audio file delivered in the internet like on-demand talks, radio downloaded or streamed through the use of applications such as google play. Podcast is one of the ways of informing users of services and programmes available in the library.

Academic libraries can also provide digital marketing services and, online entertainment services to users. They can also provide bibliotherapy services for users during this difficult time. This could be done by providing electronic books that would help users to relieve boredom caused by lockdown, hunger and loss of loved ones to corona virus.

Challenges:

Academic libraries in Nigeria are faced by a lot of problem that militate against provision of effective services in times of pandemic. One of the major challenges is inadequate funding. Academic libraries in Nigeria are expected to receive ten percent of the recurrent budget of universities. Although this amount is meagre, yet many university administrators do not release this money to the library. Most academic libraries in Nigeria depend on Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) which is for circumscribed projects like books, shelves, building etc. It is not flexible enough to allow the library to provide proactive services

Moreover, academic libraries lack infrastructure. The ICT infrastructure is not reliable. There is network problem always, which is caused by low bandwidth. There is epileptic power supply. According to USAID, (2020), Nigeria is generating only 4000 megawatts of electricity which is not enough for the country.

The poverty level of the country has increased as the price of crude oil now is \$21 which is not up to the cost of production. Even at this cost nobody is buying the crude oil because the global lockdown caused by corona virus. The exchange rate of Naira to one Dollar is N450 (Daily Trust, 2020). Nigeria's total public debt stock rose from 8.32 trillion Naira in the third quarter of 2013 to 28.63 trillion during the first quarter of 2020 (Ejechi, 2020). Nigeria depends on external funding in financing her infrastructural projects like roads, electricity, rails, education etc. A 244% increase in debt figure in the last seven years is huge and dangerous. Moreover, it now seems obvious that some of the loans are diverted to personal pocket in view of the level of corruption going on and inability of the projects for which the fund is purportedly spent to improve their services, not to talk of, return on investment for loan repayment. In other words, the libraries lack the infrastructural development required to provide effective services to the users.

Furthermore, some library staff lack the skills and competencies required to provide effective services to users in the information age. (Tella, Akande, Orim & Olaniyi, 2018). These skills include technical and ICT skills that will enable the library staff navigate through massive information in the library to retrieve information relevant to the needs of users. In addition, members of staff who possess the required training are transferred to sections where they will not apply their skills.

Moreover, most of the library users are poor. They do not have laptops and android handsets and many of them are residing with their parents in the rural areas where there is no electricity and telecommunication network. The National Multidimensional Poverty Index for Nigeria which was published as part of the National Human Development Report 2018 indicated that 51% of Nigerians are multidimensionally poor (UNDP, 2019).

Conclusion:

The library staff should be trained to provide effective services to users. Although power supply is not regular, it should be augmented with solar light to reduce the cost of electricity and improve efficiency. The solar panels are available in local petrol filling stations and solar companies. The reference librarians should be given palliatives in the form of money for data, fuel, and air time. Academic libraries should bring their services to bear on their users through ICT for academic, research, lifelong learning and recreational purposes.

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