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## **Users' Satisfaction in Academic Libraries: Issues and Strategies for Intervention**

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### **Abstract**

*Libraries and information centres are defined by their collections, services and audiences. Academic libraries exist to support their parent institutions in teaching, research, study and community services. The justification for rigorous and complex organization of library materials is the satisfaction of the users. Despite past efforts at achieving this, recent studies indicate users' dissatisfaction. This paper examined past efforts at meeting users' needs, identified existing complaints and suggested strategies for intervention such as full computerization, closed access shelves, internet connectivity, electronic cataloguing, and pragmatic user education among others. It also recommended linkages and collaboration with multinational corporations as an option of generating extra fund and endowments to augment their statutory subventions. A ranking system by Nigerian Library Association and National Library of Nigeria based on academic libraries' automation and collection status was also recommended.*

**Keywords:** *Users' satisfaction, (intervention) academic libraries,*

## **Introduction**

Academic libraries are the most patronized in the Nigerian library system given the sophistication of the clientele and their preoccupation with teaching, studying and research. Fawowe (1989) surveyed students' use of University of Ilorin Library and indicated that 94.8% of the students use the facilities. There is need to fully exploit the myriad of information stored in different formats in the library for an average academic to operate from a robust knowledge-base that makes for excellence and outstanding results. It is not enough for users to come to the library: one must ask whether their needs are fully met.

Akinbode (2002) noted that it is the responsibility of the library to render certain services to users so as to ensure maximum use of library materials. Such services among others include: user education, issuance of library guide, assistance in the location of documents, literature search, readers' advisory service, inter-library loan, reprographic services and translation. The intellectual productivity of the Nigerian academic as reflected in outputs such as journal publications, qualitative teaching, book publications, conference and workshop proceedings as well as mastery of subject specialization will be comparable to any international standard once the place of the library is not trivialized and compromised in the scheme of things. This paper therefore essentially seeks to:

- Identify existing users complaints
- Examine why past efforts have not yielded desired results
- Suggest current trends of helping academic library clientele maximize the use of library resources.

## **Literature Review**

The whole essence of organization of library materials is to meet the information needs of users. The satisfaction of users therefore is the justification for acquisition, cataloguing, classification, indexing, abstracting, automation and other complex processes that characterize technical and reader services efforts. Egbafe and Muhammed (2000) citing Kilgour (1985) posited that libraries should become user driven and information providers rather than collection developers; a departure from bibliographic services to user services. The extent to which users are able to locate and retrieve materials, feel comfortable with and find convenient the processes of library arrangement, develop an unshakeable confidence

in the library as an information clinic are the benchmarks for users satisfaction.

Oyesika and Oduwole (2004) in their study of the use of academic libraries discovered that majority of the users do not know the proper methods of retrieving materials in the library, as a good percentage of them get materials on the shelves through trial and error. They also found that the collections were inadequate in meeting user demands. In the same vein, Mabawonku (2004) asserts that resources in the libraries of Nigerian universities are already overstretched and inadequate for the needs of the academic and research staff as well as the full-time students. She opines further that most of the books are outdated, the journal subscriptions grossly irregular. In addition, there are few functional audio-visual and ICT resources and inadequate seating capacities.

Effective and efficient library services must be entrenched and treasured for Nigerian academics to continually aspire and sustain world class standards in their intellectual pursuits. Kavulya (2004) avers that access to adequate library resources is essential to the attainment of superior academic skills. Exposure to electronic databases, up-to-date books and state-of-the-art facilities engenders in the user the confidence and assurance that the library is a place to constantly visit.

Osagie (2003) quoting Harper (1905) observed that the equipment of the library will never be finished until it has upon its staff, men and women whose sole work shall be, not the care of books, not the cataloguing of books but giving of instructions for their use. Just like a well equipped clinic without sound medical personnel is a library devoid of skillful professionals. The satisfaction derivable from academic libraries is a measure of the caliber of staff recruited. It is imperative therefore that the best hands are employed and sustained.

Agaja (1997) posits that librarians should be skillful in the complex art of managing human and material resources, information packaging, library repositioning, strategic planning, budgeting and effective allocation of funds among competing needs. It behooves an individual librarian to upgrade perspective, technical and human relations skills to remain relevant and attractive to the patrons of academic libraries.

Unomah (1987) asserts that students and researchers using academic libraries are generally not finding it easy to use the library properly. According to him, majority of them are not aware of relevant abstracts, indexes and interlibrary loan services, and that among those who are aware of the existence of subject catalogue, about half do not use it or have difficulty in using it. This picture is indeed pathetic when juxtaposed with concerted efforts at user education usually mounted by these libraries.

Recognizing the centrality of user education in aiding users to forage the rich and compelling resources in the libraries and to help keep pace with the exponential growth in published materials, Edem Edema and Lawal (1996) reported among others that user education is deficient as a result of lack of qualified personnel and lack of time for teaching/practical work; they advocate allocation of sufficient credit units and utilization of the most competent librarians in its execution.

Eteng (2003) observes that the sheer volume of information and the diversity of formats plus the multidisciplinary context of subjects like law, medicine, agriculture have made it difficult for a single information professional to achieve mastery over the specific subject area, thus making it arduous for user satisfaction to be attained. However, Omekwu (2003) alerts us that the information professional has unlimited sources to assist his/her users. He called for necessary capacity building that will empower the librarian to serve the users effectively in an electronic environment. Each librarian must take practical steps, set reasonable targets and invest time and money in sharpening information communication technology competences.

Encyclopedia Britannica (2000) states that technology has changed and allowed ever new ways of creating, storing, organizing and disseminating information, thus public expectation of the role of libraries has increased. The library cannot afford to be a mere keeper of recorded information but must be proactive, vibrant and keep abreast with latest information technology to maintain relevance and meet up with the multifarious needs and expectations of its users.

## **Basic Issues**

Based on participant observation and arising from literature reviewed, the complaints or frustrations of users of academic libraries in Nigeria can be categorized into the following:

### *Access/retrieval problems*

Ordinarily the catalogue provides easy and quick retrieval of materials from the collection, but users find it difficult to use it. Some clientele who use it complain that materials appearing on the catalogue are most times not found on the shelves, either due to outright theft or mis-shelving (Akande, 2003). Also according to Adelani (1998), users complain that information searching through a manual catalogue consumes time.

### *Obsolescence/Inadequacy of materials*

Users are usually elated with timely, accurate and recent information. On the contrary, Oyediran-Tidings (2004) and Mabawonku (2004) report that users are usually discouraged due to lack of recency of books and journals, non-relevance and conspicuous absence of recommended and basic texts. Some researchers have learned to send e-mails to foreign counterparts requesting for assistance in sourcing for relevant literature for their work.

### *Absence of modern technology*

In spite of developments in information and communications technology, which have revolutionized librarianship, many of the libraries still find it difficult providing functional state-of-the-art equipment. Oketunji (2005) confirms that application of computers to library and information activities in Nigeria has been more of a dream than reality. Similarly, Mabawonku (2002) maintains that many libraries in Nigeria do not have access to internet facilities. In this information-age where hi-tech information systems have pervasively influenced all fields of human endeavour, the reliance on manual systems is coterminous with customers' frustration and dissatisfaction.

### *Lack of conducive environment*

Users need a serene and airy environment that promotes concentration and mental alertness. It is pertinent to note that many academic libraries in the country are too noisy for meaningful study and

lack functional fans and air conditioners. Where these exist, they are hampered by frequent power outage and absence of standby generators.

#### *Lack of effective manpower*

Personnel, information materials, users, building and information technology are the component parts in the library that interact to make the system (Maduekwe and Ajala, 2000). The university libraries of a necessity require the caliber of librarians that would compare favourably with their lecturer counterparts to earn their respect and admiration. Ogundipe (2001) called for a departure from the current generalist orientation to producing librarian scholar, manager, information scientist as well as general practitioner. He contends that it is this type of professional with penchant for intellectualism that can adequately satisfy and match the very high expectations of academic library patron.

#### **Strategies for Intervention**

##### *Full computerization*

Parent institutions of academic libraries should be educated that full computerization of their libraries enhances service delivery and acts as a catalyst for knowledge growth and research expansion. It transcends mere procurement of computers. The computers must be networked, integrated and applied in the performance of routine activities. This system allows the use of online public access catalogue (OPAC) to replace the manual card catalogue. It permits users to retrieve materials through several access points beyond the traditional author, title and subject. Proper networking makes it possible for users to login from remote locations, thus accessing the catalogue, and making reservations without physically coming to the library building.

##### *Closed access shelves*

One of the frustrations of users is not finding books on the shelves whereas the library records show that such materials are available. They are either stolen or mis-shelved. Installation of electronic security system like 3M, circuit monitoring camera and television will forestall theft and expose attempts to hide books. The automation of the system will free many junior staff from routine jobs to man the shelves; ensuring daily shelving and shelf-reading and attending directly to users' requests. This arrangement will preclude users' direct access or contact with the shelves,



thus making for water-tight surveillance over the shelves and eliminating the embarrassing incidence of missing or misplaced books on the shelf.

#### *Internet connectivity*

Daniel (2000) opines that internet makes possible worldwide accessibility to information databases, library catalogues, publishers' catalogues, encyclopedias, dictionaries, public information and listings, maps, travel time-tables and many other reference sources. Internet has become the magic tool in the hand of a reference librarian to promptly resolve users' puzzles and queries. An academic library in this time and age can only ignore it to the frustration of its users.

#### *Electronic cataloguing*

An academic library with internet facilities can comfortably use any of the search engines like Google or MSN, type in 'library of congress online catalog', select one of the default access points (ISBN, title, author) with corresponding ISBN number or title of the book or name of the author and click detail records, thus downloading full bibliographic records of materials available in the Library of Congress. This enhances efficiency and reduces time lag between cataloguing and shelving new materials. Hitherto, new arrivals spent months in technical services heightening user frustration.

#### *Procurement of commercial online databases*

This is a set of records held in an electronic format, made accessible to users who have paid annual subscriptions to the vendors. These have different modules corresponding to different subjects available in a given university. Subscription guarantees access to thousands of online journals and books. Some of them provide digitized theses and dissertations. Abstracts and full-texts can be retrieved depending on the choice of the patrons. It stands to boost the university collection and complement the hard copies, thereby correcting the complaints about obsolete and irrelevant collection.

#### *Specialized reference librarian*

Academic libraries should ensure that subject specialists are allowed to man reference services. When a person with good mastery of a subject helps students and staff for literature search and other subject specific issues, the likelihood of comprehensiveness, depth and finesse

will be assured. Users feel at home with somebody who understands their professional concepts and nuances. This will definitely make for mutual respect and appreciation.

#### *Pragmatic user education*

Heads of academic libraries must show a high level of assertiveness and dynamism, persuading other policy-makers to give prominence to the teaching of use of library. It must be more practical oriented where students and staff are taught library skills, internet surfing techniques, information literacy, referencing styles, computer appreciation and general use of audio-visual equipment. For students, appropriate credit units should be earned. The trainer must of necessity be above the trainee. This imposes serious responsibility for capacity building on the individual librarians and the entire library as a unit.

#### *Provision of rugs for the reading areas*

Frequent movements on the reading floor areas produce too much noise and consequently distraction. It will be imperative to cover the floor with rugs and thus reduce such noise to the barest minimum. Also the maintenance department should constantly monitor faulty appliances capable of generating noise and repair same promptly.

#### *Standby generating set*

Every library in this part of the globe must insist on having a standby generating set of reasonable capacity to substitute for incessant power failure, which subject users to a hot environment that discourages reading and concentration.

#### *Weekly brainstorming sessions*

Academic library management should institute statutory weekly brain-storming sessions for librarians II and above or their equivalents. This will ensure proper feedback, re-evaluation of strategies and presentation of seminars on topical issues in library and information services. Other faculty members should be invited to such departmental seminars. Adequate publicity should be given to discussion of current professional trends, thus stimulating the interest and awareness of the academic community towards the library. The era of arm-chair librarianship is over and we need to understand that as a service industry,

public perception of the library unit must be guarded and shaped by the practitioners.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The provision of world class and state-of-the-art library and information services by academic libraries in Nigeria is non-negotiable. It is the basis for determining and defining the quality of study, teaching and research. The application of information communications technology to service delivery is the hallmark of modern librarianship and we cannot afford to be oblivious of its relevance in terms of offering new channels for learning, remote access to collection, dissemination of information, digital preservation, administrative and management support.

Academic library managements need linkages and collaborations capable of attracting fund, sponsorship and endowments to enable them implement these strategies. In this regard, multinational corporations, banks and other public-spirited individuals should be approached to assist. Students and staff should also be mobilized to pay library development levies.

Nigerian Library Association in conjunction with National Library of Nigeria should institute annual ranking of academic libraries based on their automation and collection status. Academic institutions are highly sensitive of ranking and would want to avoid any publicity that tends to portray them as disadvantaged, inferior and of low public image. This will psychologically stimulate them to improve library facilities. Implementation of these measures will enhance the services of academic libraries and offer greater satisfaction to users.

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