

FEE CHARGING IN NIGERIAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: WHAT JUSTIFICATION?

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of charging as it affects Nigerian Academic Libraries. The issue is looked at from the economic, socio-cultural and political viewpoints. Because of its complexity from the three perspectives mentioned above, it was concluded that while Generalized Library Services could be made free, charging can be introduced for Personalized Library Services and Information Services. However, a clear distinction must be made between these three categories of services.

Introduction

The library is a service which Nigerian Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education provide for their members at no personal cost of them to facilitate the main academic activities of research, teaching and studying. The traditional function of a library is to serve as a storehouse of knowledge and a workshop for the scholar with the librarian as the book-keeper. However, with the advent of the information explosion the function of the library has expanded and the role of librarians has become more complex. Recent trends suggest that the library that merely exhibits its book wares has no relevance to the community. A library must be involved in selecting and acquiring, organising and packaging, storing and preserving, retrieving and disseminating information.

Services Provided in Nigerian Academic Libraries

Nigerian academic libraries provide two major types of services to their patrons. These are: *Technical* and *Readers* services.

The Technical services are usually carried out behind the scene. They enhance the adequate and timely performance of the Readers services. Subsumed in Technical services are: Ordering and Acquisition, Accessioning, Cataloguing and Classification, Shelving and Shelve maintenance. The Readers services are however of direct benefit to the academic community. These services seek to provide answers to numerous enquiries by the library's patrons. Subsumed in Readers services are: Circulation of books, Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), Current Awareness Services (CAS), Inter-library loan, Reprographic, Reference and Translation services.

The placement of Bindery and Collection Development under either Technical or Readers Services however vary from one institution to another. Some libraries choose to place Bindery under Readers services. Their library, they argue, undertake the binding of these, projects, etc for their patrons than they do the re-binding of mutilated library materials. A similar argument is proffered for placing

Collection Development often depend on the requests made to the library by the academic community even though subject specialists in the library do make their contributions as well.

One other service that used to be provided by the Ibadan University Library (now Kenneth Dike Library) in the years past is telex service. This facility considerably widened the scope of the library's reference services both nationally and internationally, bringing the library into closer contact with such major libraries as the British Lending Division at Boston Span, U.K: and with the WHO Library in Geneva which has a direct link with the MEDLINE online search service in the U.S.A. (U.I. Lib. Guide, 1989).

The library has also recently added a new service to the list above-Literature searching on CD-ROM- conceived about five years ago but only becoming fully operational in 1993. The service has been beneficial to researchers judging from numerous requests for literature searching both within and outside the University. The library currently has in its possession, databases in Agriculture, Medicine, Science and Technology and Public Affairs, and will soon be adding databases in Education and Arts.

Generalised Library Services, Personalised Library Services and Information Services

For the purpose of this paper rather than for administrative convenience, the authors realised the need for a re-categorisation of services rendered in libraries. A critical look at these services will obviously lead to a re-categorisation that cut across the traditional distinction between the Technical services and the Readers services.

In reality, in academic libraries, the provision of materials and the arrangement of the materials; Guidance and Advisory services (especially as offered in the location of materials and in the choice of reading); teaching the use of the library and stimulating reading (e.g. exhibitions, displays of paperbacks, simple accessibility, attractive layout, etc). are services rendered to all classes of patrons regardless of age, status, etc. They can therefore be appropriately referred to as Generalized library services.

Certain other services are best described as Personalized library services. Examples of these are: Reprography and Inter-library loan (Limited to materials that are readily obtainable by purchase and are needed for research, not simply for general reading). The Reprographic service include simple photocopying, making of microfilm, enlarging photographic prints from negatives, making slides as well as high-grade copy-work for book illustrations, etc for an individual. Inter Library loan, on the other hand, involve transactions in which library materials are made available by one library to another for the use of an individual patron.

Sometimes however, reference librarians, apart from guiding and advising the user in the pursuit of information do provide the information themselves. I.e. the user is given the information outright rather than being referred to it. This is usually with a view to meeting the needs of readers upskilled in the use of the library and/or with tight work schedule. This service is called Information service. Literature

searching, Abstracting and Transaction of Journal articles, papers and reports in foreign languages are example of this service.

Statement of the Objective

Many academic papers have been written on the issue of charging for library and information services. It has become evident from these papers that there is always the interplay of socio-cultural, economic and political issues involved with associated balancing of public and private interests. Whereas the communities which the academic libraries serve feel that the services rendered by the library should be free, probably from the socio-cultural and political viewpoints, there is the need to keep the library properly functioning to be able to support learning, teaching and research.

Presently in Nigeria, the economy is seriously in bad shape. The naira (national currency) has been greatly devalued (CBN, 1993). The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) is currently battling for adequate funding of the Universities. The Union is also, as part of the struggle, demanding for separate funding of the libraries. It has however not entirely succeeded. The question then is, will it not be justified to charge for certain library and information services so that the library can be able to discharge its expected duties to the academic community?

This paper will critically examine fee charging in Nigerian academic libraries in the context we find ourselves today while taking into consideration the socio-cultural and political issues.

The Traditional Approach to Charging in Libraries

Academic library, as has already been noted above, is an integral part of the university system that should be seen as supporting academic activities of learning, teaching and research. The fundamental principle of rendering library services free has been the vogue in librarianship for ages. Library services were categorized as social services, just as in the cases of health, police, defence, education, etc., that should be funded collectively. The genesis of public support for libraries can be traced to Lexington Massachusetts almost two centuries ago (Hilton, 1978) where the community taxed themselves \$60 to provide a juvenile library. Earlier, at about 1810, Caleb Bingham had actually introduced philanthropy into the provision of library services in Salisbury, Connecticut (Hilton, 1978). This resulted into free libraries for youths, at first and eventually for the entire community. Two clear avenues (community taxes and philanthropy) were unconsciously instituted for funding services had been the tradition in libraries right from the start.

In recent times, there had been so much controversies on the idea of free library services. It started with the public libraries and has now infiltrated into other libraries.

Various arguments have been advanced in favour and against fee-based library services. This paper is intended to weigh these arguments with the aim of recommending standards of operation with specific reference to academic libraries in a developing country like Nigeria.

Alternative Arguments For and Against Charging

Economic Consideration: Economic consideration has played an important role in the impasse between the proponents and opponents of fee charging in libraries. Librarians are presently caught-up in the logjam of chronic financial malaise and the provision of good services. It is this search that has resulted in the idea of charging fees for library services. It is known that for the library to continue to be relevant, it must keep the confidence of the academic community it serves. Upon such confidence depends the existence of libraries and their future.

Economic reasons, more than ever before, now form the bedrock of the arguments for fee charging in the academic libraries. The struggles of library administrators to maintain quality services and prevent further deterioration due to lack of funds have proved an impossible task. Most academic libraries in Nigeria for example have no capability for good services and provision of quality materials because of poor funding in the face of skyrocketing foreign exchange rates and hyperinflation. It is even more grievous because academic libraries are usually the last to be favoured with an increased during a period of buoyancy and the first to get a cut during depression (Nwagha, 1980) In fact, some academic libraries experience reduced funding during a boom! (Nwafor, 1990)

Hence, to wave aside the need to charge for library services is to risk the continued functioning of the library system which will no doubt result in the demise of higher education in Nigeria. Library services may wholly or in part be offered to consumers at a price. User charges promote equity to the extent that the price a consumer pays is proportional to the quantity of service demanded. Efficiency implies maximizing library services and benefits while minimising costs. It is even economically justified to impose user fees because it is the baseline for judging the efficiency of the service rendered. The imposition of fees provides a mechanism for determining preference through willingness to pay (Gell, 1979a) Indeed, instead of providing services that are ordinarily unnecessary and irrelevant, the intensity of demands helps to regulate allocation of scarce resources in such a manner that preferred services are given adequate attention to such an extent that there will be prioritization in dispensing library services. Library users are therefore bound to be more appreciative of the services they get from the library.

The apparent increase in students enrolment in Nigerian higher institutions has not generally been matched with improvement of facilities and the growth of resources available. (Ola, 1990) It is pertinent that there should be harmonization of the resources available in libraries with the needs of the growing population of library users. The reality on ground is such that students are admitted for higher education annually without due consideration for the capability of the libraries to cope. For libraries to be able to service the growing teeming population of users, some forms of charges have to be instituted to supplement the meagre funds provided by the parent institutions.

Proponents of fee charging for library services further argue that charging should be seen as a means of rejuvenating a withering flower. The whole emphasis is on the improvement of the quality of services and facilities provided to the users.

In highlighting the impasse caused by lack of funds for public libraries and giving advice on how library services could be advanced, Hicks (1980) warned, that they must either succeed in increasing the variety of resources input that are allocated to them or they must seriously reconsider the nature of library services outputs, that is, narrowing their role, scope and functions in modern urban society. It will be more disastrous not to have library systems at all than to have fee charging ones. Since whatever accrues to libraries from the fees charged would be recycled into the library system with the aim of maintaining a level or even improving services to the end users, fee charging should be allowed. According to Gell, (1979a) charges are traditionally used to finance social services that will be of benefit to the public.

The foregoing are various economic arguments that have been advanced to support fee charging for library services. There have however been opposing view to these economic reasons. The tendency to apply business methods to library operations has led, unfortunately to imitation of business procedures and analyses which has distorted library services. Business thinking has partially replaced socially oriented library thinking of the past. Fee charging in libraries seems to have an imbued complexity to it.

According to Smith (1981) library charges are, of course feasible, but to introduce charges would introduce a radical shift in the character and quality of the service which librarians administer. This would have detrimental effect on the quality of the service and would not benefit the society that the library serves. In Nigerian Universities, students are generally not willing to pay for library services. They believe all aspects of education should be the responsibility of government and therefore should be publicly funded. In fact, attempts to introduce tuition fees in tertiary institutions in the country in the past were met with rebuff through students demonstration.

This takes us to the socio-cultural arguments on fee charging for library services.

Socio-Cultural arguments: Libraries generally are repositories of knowledge where people are supposed to go and get information that will enlighten them. Libraries are expected also to function as preservation centers for carrying on a people's cultural heritage. Getting access to such knowledge should not be restricted by the imposition of fees. In fact, it is a citizen's right to have knowledge of his culture. Why then, should he pay? Retting (1981) said the rights of every individual to have access to information negates all forms of charges in the library. The conventional role of the library is to make information available to the users regardless of his/her status. The question is how libraries can charge without fundamentally contradicting their basic philosophical ideals. In fact, the principle of charging in libraries will have the effect of limiting accessibility of information to the rich thereby marginalising the poor who cannot afford to pay. Apart from being detrimental to the development of a nation, it is simply unfair. Ignorance and apathy are vices we ought to fight collectively. Literacy campaigns are meaningless when access to repositories of knowledge is censored by tariffs. We should perhaps note that the world's library services are only available to those who have achieved literacy. Our aim should be to widen this access to culture as a right and not restrict

it by commercial principles to those who can pay and to what those who can pay demand. (Smith, 1991) At a time when people are clamouring for equal access to educational opportunities, libraries are censoring access based entirely on ability to pay. Acquisition of materials begins to be tailored along the needs of people who can afford to pay and these are significantly different from the needs of other users.

In academic institutions, the introduction of fee-based library services may boomerang. Ability to pay has nothing to do with productivity. The fact that a user can afford to pay for a particular service does not mean he will be able to utilise the service more effectively than somebody who cannot afford to pay. The person who cannot afford access to such service may have better ways of utilising such service for the optimum benefit of the society. Fee charging may therefore have paralysing effect on research in academic institutions. Materials are usually not used to exhaustion. The fact that somebody consults a dictionary does not reduce the value and usefulness of the same dictionary to future users. It will seem therefore that the charges for references services means over-valuing library resources resulting in sheer exploitation of the users.

The proponents of fee charging have argued that, charging should not be viewed from a narrow perspective. It should be seen as apart of a macro-national problem. Social services are now being commercialized and even privatised. The government can no longer afford to support these services as it used to. If people are beginning to take full responsibilities of their hospital bills without complaints, they should be ready to accommodate library charges in like manner.

People have argued that uniform fees for academic library use will mean discrimination against people who do not use libraries often or those whose information needs are relatively low. This argument has been disproved as irrelevant. Infringing on access to information right has been practised in libraries unintentionally for so long. Lending specific number of books out to categories or level of people depicts discrimination based on status e.g. in Nigerian universities, undergraduate students can not borrow more than four books for just two weeks whereas, graduate students can borrow six books for one months at a time. Uniform fees should be imposed on, and equal services rendered to all patrons of the library regardless of age or level. The fact that one is an undergraduate does not make his information needs any less than that of a faculty member, he therefore should not be charged lesser than other users of the library as long as his right to access information is not impinged. However the proponents of free library services have argued that charging for library services will amount to double charges because these social services have been catered for collectively. Publicly financed libraries, and especially publicly available libraries, by law belong to that part of our society which is free at the point of use and they are financed out of taxes. (Smith, 1981) Library services should not be billed under any guise. Billing in the library will be tantamount to making the citizens pay double for one service. Financing libraries is already the public's responsibility which is collective. To make a collective responsibility subjective is pure exploitation.

It is further argued that the social benefits derived by the society from the services of library are so enormous that the public should be ready and willing to

provide fiscal support. According to Kranih (1980), In general, library services can be considered educational in nature, although specific library services are difficult to classify in terms of benefits. For example, the benefits accruing to an individual or to society as a whole from reading are not clearly defined. The library contributes to the cultural resources of individuals and their communities by supplying necessary materials. It also supplies the information needed for various government functions from which the community at large benefits. It provides adults with the materials that help them acquire skills in order to contribute to the economic and social well-being of the society. It offers schools the support system needed to perform the educational process. All these services result in social benefits, the government should therefore be ready to carry the responsibility of funding the libraries.

Some people on the other hand, do not believe that the responsibility of funding libraries should be carried by the public. They are of the opinion that most people who make use of the libraries have first and foremost personal motives and benefits they are pursuing. That is why librarians have to spend time answering individual's queries. Delivery of information is ultimately a one-to-one relationship. It involves intellectual analysis, personal attention, continuing training and education— all labour intensive and not much increased by the application of machine technology... the librarian must analyse each information request in order to satisfy it. (Blake and Pemutter, 1977) This implies that the library user has his personal desires to meet that is why he engages the attention of the librarian personally.

At the level of government, some social services like defence, fire, health, etc. are publicly funded as against personalized services like clothing, food and housing which are sole responsibilities of the individuals. Looking at a library, there are certain general services that are rendered, for example, shelving, assisting users to retrieve materials on the shelves, etc. These services are rendered to all categories of users irrespective of age/status. On the other hand there are personal services like photocopying, inter-library loans, etc. are also rendered in the library. Gel (1979b) says it is imperative that librarians distinguish between those activities which are fundamental to the library identity and those services that derive from it. There is a need to make this distinction, therefore, to show that the social responsibility of librarians, as a matter of tradition, has not been deliberately contravened.

Political arguments: It is now becoming apparent that every profession has to struggle to make its own impression and create image for itself. No matter how important a profession is to the society, its political foresight will enhance the recognition accorded it in the society. Librarians are politically meek and they shy away from partisan politics. Their belief is that the role of librarians is to facilitate political awareness and process by providing tools for educating politicians about ideal political systems. Some four decades ago, Zimmermann (1953) expressed concern on the passive role of librarians in politics, that Librarians as a whole are not politically minded, nor are they usually aware, fully, of the place of library in the political process. Librarians too often confuse the political process with partisan

process and feel that somehow it is going to contaminate them.

For the past four years, efforts have been made to establish the professional status of Nigerian Library Association (NLA) through promulgation of the necessary enabling law. Whereas, it was easy for other professional bodies like Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN), Computer Association of Nigeria (CAN), etc., it has been very difficult for the Library Association to obtain the decree establishing its professional status from government. This is simply because the Association has nobody well connected with high government officials to 'push' the draft decree through.

This is a clear indication of the political weakness of librarians. It is important that librarians get active in politics otherwise it will be very easy to relegate them to the background—for example, it took the concerted efforts of all Nigerian academics under the auspices of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) to get ten percent (10%) of University recurrent expenditure for University libraries in 1993. All efforts hitherto made by University library administrators to draw the attention of government to the poor funding of university libraries fell on deaf ears. The government simply ignored them because they had no political weight.

One wonders how librarians can influence decisions that concern them and the profession if they are not part of the decision making process or if they are politically passive.

Recommendations

Now, having examined the arguments, the question is how justified or how justifiable will fee charging in Nigerian academic libraries be? The answer to this question might look subjective rather than objective. However we are recommending that, foremost a clear distinction has to be made between generalized library services, personalized library services and information services.

Both personalized library services and information services serve the interest of individuals/group. They are usually requested for, to achieve a set goal and in most cases of no direct benefit to the society hence these services should be charged for. In order to maintain the conventional rôle of libraries to the society in general and Academic community in particular, services that have pervasive effect on either large groups of library patrons or all patrons should not be charged for.

Perhaps, more importantly now, librarians must realise that political passivity will bring retrogression to library system. The onus is on the shoulders of library administrators to blow the library's trumpet. They must continually defend the needs of the library at all times. Librarians must know that funds come from government only through constant pressure. Just like the Academic Staff Union of Universities pressurized Nigerian government to recognise the place of education in this country, so also must librarians pressurize the funding authorities to place libraries in their proper position in the academic community. Libraries must now evolve a vigorous political agenda which must be aggressively pursued. It should be noted that, whereas it is the business of government to provide support for such activities are significantly beneficial to the public, initiatives on political moves of government should be exhibited by librarians in order get necessary support to

continue to carry out their roles.

Furthermore, at the local levels i.e within Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education, librarians should begin to take keen interests in politics and get more involved in the Institution's committee and faculty boards. They must start to make positive contributions at all fori whenever they have the opportunity. Librarians must be more vocal, this will make their faculty colleagues more aware and sympathetic towards their plights.

Finally, there is a need for the government to identify and spell out its priorities clearly. There are so many projects that are not of immediate importance to the society which are being consistently funded by government to the detriment of more useful and important projects like education, library development, rural growth, food production, etc. One would have thought scarce resources should be used for financing projects that will benefits the people immensely. Funds spent on ammunitions, armoured tanks, etc., should be reduced particularly as the world is tending towards global disarmament. Much as one appreciate the importance of defence, priority should be given to the promotion of learning which is of direct benefit to the society.

Conclusion

While the economic, political and socio-cultural arguments for fee charging in Nigerian Academic Libraries cannot be ignored, there is also the need to reconcile these with the necessity to keep the library properly functioning for the benefit of the Academic community and the larger society in general and to boost the morale (through motivation) of the custodians (librarians and information specialists) of the Information resources contained therein for maximum effectiveness and efficiency of the library. To support of library and information services suggested above. The support of library administrators and the parent institutions is however needed in this regard. As stated earlier, it will be more disastrous not to have library systems at all than to have fee charging ones.

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