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IMPLEMENTING INFORMATION COMMONS: THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR NIGERIAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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Abstract

Information Commons has in recent times made a sudden, dramatic and wide spread appearance in academic and research libraries in the developed countries. Despite its high potential to boost scholarship, improve research quality and enhance library patronage, information commons is not in Nigerian academic library presently.

This paper focus the prospects and challenges of implementing information commons in Nigerian academic libraries. As the seeking patterns and expectations of users continued to be tremendously influenced by innovations in ICT, creation of Information Commons would improve service delivery to patrons. The paper identified inhibiting factors that would challenge the adoption and creation of information commons in libraries. These include inadequate funding, poor literacy skills of staff, poor broadband access, weak ICT policy plan and weak institutional support.

Considering the prospects of implementing information commons, Nigerian academic libraries were admonished to start working towards creating information commons to increase library patronage.

Introduction

Academic libraries are established to support teaching, learning and research functions of parent institutions by rendering quality services, thereby meeting the needs of students and faculty. This supporting role of libraries is challenged by information explosion and massive technology revolution. In effect, libraries have to respond to this challenge by re-aligning the service delivery process. The old traditional methods of service delivery such as traditional face-to-face reference services is being undermined by an expanding digital world and vast digital resources which has significantly impacted on how librarians perform these activities, and how faculty and staff utilize library materials and resources (Cowgill, Beam, & Wess, 2001).

Coupled with the emergence of digital technology, literature has also reported challenges faced by the academic libraries in Africa in the information delivery process. Kissiedu (2009) says "the enormous constraints of mostly inadequate funding, severely limited access to materials and information, inadequate human and material resources that African university libraries face are also well documented, but they have remained largely un-addressed".

In Nigeria there is low ICT penetration in service delivery (Jagboro & Adewale, 2009), erratic internet services, erratic power supply and lack of hardware and software. Thus the effort of most academic libraries in providing modern information services is thwarted by the existence of these problems whose genesis is traceable to lack of adequate funding (Abubakar, 2011). Adio (2007) stated that for academic libraries to be responsive now and

be relevant in future, the libraries, without any gainsaying must be dynamic in their service. They cannot continue to use old processes. For this reason, it is quite imperative for librarians in Nigeria to re-examine the organization of the library, and the roles they play in view of increased use of information technology and its effect on the user. Also, Gbaje, (2007) opined that digital age has redefined the way librarians' provide their services. A new concept that will enhance the old traditional way to deliver resources and services to users in the digital era has emerged. It is known as Information Commons (ICs).

The Concept of Information Commons (IC)

Beagle, (1999) is a major proponent of information commons, but different writers have defined IC to suit their needs. Beagle (1999) sees "Information Commons as a conceptual, physical, and instructional space, involves an organizational realignment from prints to digital environment" He envisions an ideal environment that allows library users, accompanied by dedicated, knowledgeable consultants, to walk through the entire process of identification, retrieval, processing, and presentation of needed information in whatever format it exists. Halbert (1999) agrees with Beagle's (1999) definition of IC concept and what it involves. He says IC is "a collection of coordinated facilities providing comprehensive access to information technology" that resulted in a "dramatically" new type of library. Clement (1995), describes the IC as a designated physical place within the library building and MacWhinnie (2003) writes of the IC as being a place within the library as its "simplest form" with a more ambitious vision including the addition of collaborative workstations, high-tech classrooms, and more. While Cowgill, Beam &Wess (2001), defined IC as a single location where one can find resources (e.g., on how to write a paper or troubleshoot a computer or network problem), access numerous databases (both indices and full-text) or the library's online catalog, navigate the Internet to visit websites, and use selected software for research. Roberts (2007) view information commons as an online portal for library users to learn about information literacy or library services such as the web site. It could also be a cluster of computers in the library that have access to online catalogues or other electronic databases.

For some, however, the information commons is central to the idea of the social library. According to Bennett (2003), Information Commons are "spaces where learning is the primary activity and where focus is on facilitating the social exchanges through which information is transferred into knowledge". In the views of Bazillion and Braun (2001), IC is the combination of technical resources, information resources, and staff support for better service to users. In essence, the purpose of information commons is to bring about changes in user needs and expectations by providing resources that aid the research process of clients from beginning to the end. In other words, IC integrates in design and function library's spaces, informational resources, technological resources, production resources and support services in such a fashion that patrons' experience a seamless environment for contemplating, planning, researching and bringing to finished product their academic, intellectual and personal work.

According to Haas & Roberston (2004), the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in 2004 summarised various characteristics of IC into three elements shared by most information commons:
(i) The availability of both research and computing assistance;
(ii) A "one – stop shopping" location for a variety of library services; and

(iii) A staffing model that includes "librarians, computing professionals, and other public services staff.

The foregoing suggests that the creation of creative and flexible spaces in academic libraries will enable patrons to perform multiple tasks with a number of technologies in an environment conducive for learning.

Universal Implementation of IC in Libraries

In the last decade Information Commons have made a sudden, dramatic, and widespread appearance in academic and research libraries across North America, Europe, and elsewhere. This new service facility holds many attractions for university and library administrators because it offers an innovative service in a new physical environment for better learning. The name of the service may vary but the core service ideals remain essentially the same (Wong, 2009).

Although this path has not always been easy, those who have taken the initiative to create an integrated learning environment have found the results to be positive. Indeed, the IC implementation has become so successful, so popular with students that some universities, for example Indiana University and the University of Southern California, have created more than one. (Brewer, Hook, Welburn-Simmons and Williams, 2004). Giovale Library of Westminster College began to notice an increase in the number of students who come to the library when it decided to transform into information commons (IC) and other success stories as reported by Malenfant (2006).

One satisfied student at the University of Tennessee, where the first phase of its information commons opened in fall 2005, stated, "Every time I have been in the library after hours, the Commons has been packed full of students. Some students were finishing assignments, some doing group projects, and some just relaxing with friends. The group study areas are of the perfect number and size, and the computers have all the programs I could need on them". (Dewey & Bible, 2005)

At the Dartmouth College Library, a News Center offers comfortable seating, current print and electronic newspapers, Web access to many electronic news resources, and a large display screen featuring news from around the world. The Computing Center at Cox Hall at Emory University provides an example of a new-style computer lab, with many group areas, comfortable and moveable furniture configurations, and small classrooms.

Literature on the implementation of this innovative service ideal in African countries is sparse and new as reported by Boakye (2010) "In Ghana and in most parts of Africa the Research Commons concept is very new and some of us have not even heard about it. It can thus be described as the "new kid on the block" except in South Africa where Daniels, Darch & De Jager (2010) reported the establishment of Research Common in University of Cape Town. "In September 2008, a new, access-controlled facility called the "Research Commons" opened in a carefully-designed space on an upper floor of the main library at South Africa's University of Cape Town. The Research Commons, which is open only to postgraduates (in US terminology, graduate students) and academic staff (in US terminology, faculty), is equipped with state-of-the-art computer workstations, printing and copying facilities, individual study carrels and sound-proofed group seminar rooms, as well

as a lounge area, a small reference collection, some current periodicals of general interest, and tea and coffee. It is permanently staffed by two reference specialists. The library had already been operating a highly successful "Knowledge Commons" (primarily for undergraduates) since 2001 (De Jager, 2004). The new Research Commons is part of an integrated consortia project generously funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Effectiveness of Information Commons can be measured through assessment. But assessment of qualitative outcomes for Information Commons is sparse. However, as MacWhinnie (2003) noted "even without objective evaluation data, it is evident that ICs have been a success at many academic institutions." Beatty and White (2005) reported that one method for assessing the Commons is to benchmark it against the framework for effective learning proposed by Chickering and Gameson (1991) and went further to say that this framework has been well used as a rubric for establishing learning support in the academy and outlines seven elements that are proven to contribute to learning. These authors believe five of the seven identify learner-centered Information Commons, namely those that include spaces and services that:

• encourage cooperation among students.
• encourage active learning.
• give prompt feedback.
• emphasize time on task.
• respect diverse talents and ways of learning

Implementing Information Commons in Nigerian Academic Libraries: the Challenges

While Information Common is no longer an innovation in academic libraries especially in the United States and other countries, available literature on services rendered in Nigeria academic libraries, reveal that Information Commons (IC) is not in operation. The nearest service to it is computer laboratories as observed by Akintunde (2006) "that University of Lagos has a 120-seater complete computer laboratory fully furnished. The laboratory is an electronic reference library, and the type that should be a model for all academic libraries in Nigeria. Other libraries with computer labs include: Ibadan, Jos, Ife and Zaria. Gbaje (2007) reported that only 20 % of the 10 first generation university libraries in Nigeria provided access to digital resources within the libraries, subscribed to online databases, and provided access to resources outside their domains. None of these libraries provided online information literacy instruction. Ubiquitous cybercafé enabled students to do their term/course work outside the library, thereby denying them necessary staff reference assistance.

The computer laboratories in existence in the surveyed first generation universities offered diverse information resources and services such as user training, subscribe to e-journals, CD-ROM databases, web based resources and other forms of electronic resources. Students use these labs as a café where they can check their mails, download documents because the computers in these laboratories lack productivity software's (e.g., MS Office, ArcView, Mathematica/Maple, Adobe Acrobat, Photoshop, OmniPage, Illustrator, and Premier). (Cowgill, et.al. 2001)

Utulu (2006) and Okafor (2011) wrote on information technology application in libraries in Nigeria. They submitted that there are lots of challenges that might stall the implementation of information technology in Nigerian libraries. These challenges can be categorised under two sub-heads phases namely, the physical and the human. Under the physical aspect the following limitations can be identified: epileptic power supply, poor ICT/telecommunication infrastructures, unreliable internet connectivity, poor broadband access, poor / lack of ICT policy plan, limited physical space. These are functions of inadequate funding. Lack of commitment and quality support by institutional management, poor information literacy skill of library staff , shortage of technical staff, and lack of collaboration between library and other related areas (especially IT) constitute the human aspect.

Many scholars agree on the existence of these challenges. Sani and Tiamiyu (2005), in their evaluation of automated services in Nigerian universities found the services far from adequate, and inadequate fund was identified as one of the major obstacles. Ogunsola and Okusaga (2006) also observed that most university libraries are in deplorable conditions due to inadequate funding. Womboh and Abba (2008) reported that "due to harsh economic conditions and government apathy to library development in Nigeria, the state of ICT in University libraries is mediocre, while Akintunde (2006) also reported on these challenges. What follows takes a closer look at the vexed issue of inadequate funding and limited physical space and the way out while concentrating on the need for a paradigm shift in the human aspect area.

Finance

Parlous funding had, for about 2 decades, being the bane of library development in Nigeria. The norm assumed that 10% of the University recurrent budget will be allocated to the library for its development. But in practice what comes to them is "a paltry 10% of overhead cost of a university's recurrent budget, overhead cost being a sub-head of the regular recurrent budget of a university" Ola (2011). This amount cannot take any library far. It is compelling for libraries to look inwards for funds to render their services. Such inward looking can take the form of a policy statement that shares responsibilities such that the PG school should fund the procurement of electronic journals, Student's Union body should manage the photocopiers as well as the social space for recreation purpose. A demand can also be made on the State government to give certain percentage of the taxes collected from staff back to the university to assist the provision of the much needed physical infrastructure on campus.

Other ways of improving the internal revenue (IR) of libraries is through appeals to multinational companies to fund identifiable projects as a part of their corporate social responsibility function. The support of Alumni group and friends of the library could equally provide the additional boost needed

Building

Due to old architectural designs, functional and flexible spaces are hard to come by in most first generation universities libraries while lack of funds is stifling the new ones to have modern structures. Re-construction and renovation of old buildings might be a way to create needed space for group study, collaborative work and social space.

Institutional Management Support

Most libraries do not get the coveted quality support from their parent institutions thereby impacting on the desired optimal out- put expected. University management can only realize its mission and vision through the quality of support given to the library's need. The parent body would need to encourage collaborative efforts between the library and supporting academic units of the institution. Because mission statements of institutions were formulated in the pre-IT era, they must be reviewed to reflect the digital era.

Information Literacy Skill of Library Staff

Low level of ICT skill among librarians has been reported in literature (Ojedokun & Okafor, 2011). A unique feature of IC is to assist users to access e-resources and the supporting technology, hence   training librarians to acquire necessary skill is important, because we cannot give what we do not know or understand. We need also to be current in the information we render. That will lead us to know ways and means of access to information and then be able to explain that to our customers. Therefore information professionals would need to equip themselves with a high level of information literacy skills needed to access and manipulate information so as to transit same to end –users.

Akintunde (2006) emphasized this when he cited Manra's (2005) view that;

> *"The training of library staff is not an end in itself. The expectation is that the staff will impart the skills and knowledge gained to library end users including academic staff and students. . . . The training of end-users in the use of electronic resources should be one of the central activities in any library so that staff and students can effectively search and utilize these resources, in which institutions and donors have made substantial investments"*

This training process must be a continuum and there should be cross- training amongst library staff and other collaborative units.

Shortage of Technical Staff

A related area of concern is the shortage of technical support staff in libraries. Job turnover among the technicians is high due to poor remuneration in government establishments. One way to tackle this problem is to train and sponsor members of staff who show interest and commitment to ICT development in the library. Training and re- training of staff would create stability of jobs.

An Incremental Approach to Implementation

Understandably, the host of challenges earlier discussed as mitigating constraints to the implementation of information commons are formidable. But given the benefits associated with the adoption/implementation of information commons, partnership between ICT units and libraries, new opportunities for teaching and learning, increased access to technology,

increased gate traffic and longer stays in the collaborative workspace by users. Nigerian academic libraries, especially those with existing computer labs can and should commence a gradual approach to its implementation. Britto (2011).

In this regard, the initiative should be that of the university librarian. The proposal for the university management consideration should contain a minimum of two models using the existing library space or identifying elsewhere on campus that can be developed into ICs as proposed by Beagle, Bailey & Tierney (2006). The enormous financial requirements of the latter option may debar its preference. If the existing computer labs are to be developed to gradually provide information commons services, management should be aware that the following activities would need to be funded; deployment of productivity software's, upgrading the hardware components, setting up of collaborative workstations, reconfiguring spaces to accommodate group study rooms, create workspace for informal meetings, creating recreational facility where students can play games, take phone calls and other social activities. The commitment and financial support from the university management is vital to the successful implementation and sustainability of information commons, some thoughts may need to be given to raising a special endowment fund to finance the required activities. (Wong 2001, MacWhinnie 2003)

The suggested second step for consideration in the incremental approach is to define roles between the two major partners that is, the university library and the ICT Unit. The ICT unit's role would cover setting up and administering network services, workstation maintenance, software and hardware installations and all other associated technical support. For their parts, academic librarians should continue to be in-charge of their regular professional schedules such as the provision of reference services, bibliographic instruction and teaching information skills while providing assistance in the search and retrieval of information from a variety of resources both prints and electronic. McMullen (2007), Seal (2012).

The delineation of duties should be followed with a concerted marketing and promotion campaign to create a wide spread ownership of the concept as positive project that will bring a number of opportunities and benefits not only to the library but also to those who use and who work at the university. (Okafor,2011). The marketing could take the form of face-to face, electronic and print communication on a weekly basis or monthly basis depending on the needs of each target group (the steering and implementation committee, university community, the library and the IT staff, students and faculty according to Witchurch (2011). For these groups, an orientation and training programmes should also be organized.

Having sold the idea with assistance of funding support, an implementation team should be constituted to include administrative, library, IT staff as well as faculty and students' charged with the following assignment to: provide securable flexible workstation areas; provide workstations that allow users to capture, transfer, scan, manipulate, print and download data and information. For example workstations should be equipped with standard browsers, plug-ins, sound and video cards; provide group study spaces which are fully wired and equipped; provide spaces for laptop users; provide multimedia preview space; provide presentation practice space which is fully wired and equipped, including video playback facilities; provide printing, downloading, and file transfer capabilities;

provide adaptive technologies adequate to the needs of scholars with disabilities; provide information resources to support curriculum and research in a multitude of formats; and provide facilities for and assistance with: Searching and use of all databases to which the Library has established access, including bibliographic and full-text databases; Searching for and use of information available through the Internet/World Wide Web. (University of Calgary Information Hub Planning Document 2012)

Conclusion

The emergence of information commons in academic libraries in continents like North America and Europe is no longer an innovation. This new service facility holds many attractions for university and administrators and as a result, there is an increasing number of libraries adopting and creating information commons for enhanced service delivery.
 Nigerian academic libraries would have some challenges in implementing information commons despite the benefits associated with its creation. It is however possible if the libraries could advocate for increased funding, embark on high profile advocacy to gain institutional management support and invest in capacity building of their staff to enhance their information literacy skill,

Recommendations

As a result of the finding of this study, the following recommendations are made:

i.   Library administrators should review the mode of service delivery in compliance with the electronic age.
ii.   Library appropriated funds should be released on time and utilized effectively for better services.
        Nigerian Library Association should be proactive in the areas of training by organizing regular educational workshops and spearheading advocacy for the advancement of librarianship especially in the realm of ICT driven services. In this regard, the role and impact of Committee of University Librarians of Nigerian Universities (CULNU) should be much more evident.

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