# ACCESSIBILITY AND RETRIEVAL OF NATIONAL INFORMATION IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

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## Abstract

*This paper sets out to examine the accessibility, retrieval and use of Publications Ordinance (PO) materials in Nigerian university libraries using Kenneth Dike Library (KDL) as a case study. The survey research design was adopted and a structured questionnaire was distributed to 400 users comprising students, staff and external users. The records of the use of PO materials between October 2009 and September 2010 were also perused. Result shows that majority of users are aware of the availability and importance of legal deposits collection in the library but have difficulty in retrieving the materials due to inability to have direct physical contact with the materials. The study therefore proffers that Nigerian university libraries should, as a matter of urgency, organize PO collections and adopt a harmonized library management system in order to enhance users' access and retrieval of the materials.*

**Keywords**: Publications ordinance, Legal Deposits, Nigerian university libraries, Kenneth Dike Library, library management system, National Information.

## Introduction

Tertiary institutions constitute what is commonly described as the knowledge industry. The major stakeholders in the industry are the academic staff, students and non-academic staff. There is no doubt about the fact that the position of the academic staff in the university is an important one as they are involved in the primary activities of teaching, research, and knowledge production. Consequently, Olorunsola (2008) acknowledged that in theory a university is nothing more than a guild of scholars, each seeking to speak the truth according to his disciplines. In order to support teaching, learning and research activities of scholars in the universities, libraries are established in the heart of every institution of higher learning. Libraries as organized information systems are charged with the responsibility of providing information in furtherance of learning, teaching, research and community service. They serve as content and knowledge repositories by collecting and providing access to books, journals, and all other forms of recorded information. By acquiring, repackaging and providing access to information, libraries can ensure that the right information is made available and in the form that users can understand. As the Agenda 21 authoritatively affirms, "the need for information arises at all levels, from that of senior decision makers at the national and international levels to the grass-root and individual levels." (Agenda 21:40.1).

As major infrastructure for impactful research, academic libraries are known and accepted as indispensable components of the university system. While the scholars need access to published materials in their variety, the long-established role of the library has been to expand their access by acquiring published materials and organizing them for appropriate retrieval (Olorunsola, 2008). Moreover, university libraries in Nigeria have often maintained special collections, containing rare, archival and manuscript materials, theses or dissertations, university records; published or unpublished, faculty publications, grey literature, and other

documents of prominent citizens. Such collections may encompass regional or national collections such as Africana or Nigeriana collections aimed at facilitating research. One of the means by which these libraries build up their special collections is through legal deposits. Legal deposits are acquisitions backed-up by law. The provision of this law implies that any title published in a country must have some copies sent to the national library or any other designated libraries.

Legal Deposits Law in Nigeria had its origin in '1950 Publication Ordinance' which gave the University College Ibadan Library and the Secretariat Library in Lagos the right to collect two copies each of every book published in the country. Ibadan University Library soon undertook the publication of *Nigeria publications* as the country's National Bibliography in 1953. All regional governments also enacted their own depository provisions for publishers within their regions to deposit certain number of copies of every publication to their Regional Library Board. The Eastern Regional Board Act of 1955 gave the right to Central Library, Enugu. Western Region enacted similar Act in 1957. The Northern Nigeria "Publication Law" enacted in 1964 also vested all deposit rights with the library of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The 'Legal Deposits Law' which was enacted in 1950 and amended in 1970 recognized the Ibadan University library as the centre for legal deposits. Under this decree, the National Library as the National Bibliography Agency of Nigeria was enjoined to receive three (3), ten (10) and twenty five (25) copies of everything published in Nigeria by private or commercial publishers, State and Federal Agencies respectively within one month of publication at their own expense. Till date, National Library of Nigeria and many publishers in Western Nigeria still send two copies of their publications purely on complimentary basis to KDL, University of Ibadan. In spite of the vicissitudes of the time, Ibadan collection of government publications and legal deposit materials is fairly comprehensive, rich in unique items and valuable for research. PO materials include: core subject textbooks, reference books, journals, magazines and newspapers. Others include religious and cultural materials, children literature, institutional and government documents in various media.

This arrangement led to the establishment of PO Unit in the Reference Section of KDL. Most of the collections in the unit are indigenous titles published in Nigeria and they cut across all disciplines. Even though KDL cannot however, claim to have complete collection of legal deposits or PO materials from 1950 till date, its acquisition of legal deposits and government documents constitutes significant proportion of the entire collection in the library. PO materials are printed- book materials published in Nigeria and more often than not, containing information about Nigeria's social-cultural background, economic history, law, politics, ethnicity and they portray the general way of life of the people. Beside teaching, learning and research potentials of these materials, they are a means of reflecting on Nigeria's cultural heritage and identity. If properly preserved and disseminated they will help in empowering and positioning individuals for the desired national development.

Statistics show that PO materials are highly consulted in most Nigerian university libraries. At the University of Ibadan, PO collection is classed with other rare collections and placed under close monitoring. Users are not allowed physical or direct access to the PO shelves. Users are issued request forms on which information about the materials, the users and the remark of the library officer in-charge is demanded. These include: author, title, year of publication, and call marks of the materials requested in the PO collection. Other personal information includes user's department and level of study and hall of residence .The request form is then used in searching for the information materials and then filed for statistics

purpose. As close access materials, the organization of the materials on shelves is done according to accession numbers which is also the date of arrival. At the University of Lagos library, similar arrangement has also been reported. Aderibigbe, (2002) described the classification scheme used for the organization of government publications at the University of Lagos Library in Nigeria as being done according to authors. The scheme arranges publications alphabetically according to continents, countries, and states of origin. Unfortunately this arrangement does not allow related subjects to be brought together. These information materials can only be optimally utilized if adequate mechanisms are put in place to facilitate accessibility and retrieval. How accessible are PO materials in Nigerian university libraries?

## Literature Review

Many advanced nations of the world acknowledge the place of national publications in national development. They value highly, the materials of knowledge that emanate from intellectual citizens and housed in a purpose building infrastructure, systematically arranged and made available for use as vital requirements for daily survival. The materials can broaden knowledge as well as sharpen and upgrade skills. They are means of investigating past events with a view to finding solutions to current problems of keeping abreast of current developments as well as serving as the repository of the heritage and civilization of the people. Okwilagwe (2001) states that books are cultural products and often bear the essence of the culture in which they originate and were published. He further stated that books record a people's experience and artifacts. For instance, the *Nigerian yearbook,* published and printed by 'Times Press (Nigeria)', Apapa, contains all that one might need to know about Nigeria. *Things Fall Apart*, a novel written by Chinua Achebe bears the culture of a particular group of people, *the Igbos,* in Eastern Nigeria.

For communities to realize their development choices, enhancement of their capacity to deliver and cope with societal changes, information accessibility is a critical necessity (Leautier, 2004). The ability to access information is especially vital in rural and marginalized areas. Libraries in these areas can promote indigenous development solutions that address problems specific to their regions, nations or communities by providing access to international information resources as well as locally developed knowledge (Baker, 2006). Through providing access to, and acting as repositories of indigenous knowledge, libraries can strengthen local communities by helping them develop their local solutions for their development challenge. Agenda 21 calls for use of indigenous knowledge and approaches when appropriate to provide local communities and resource users with information and know-how they need to manage their environment and resources sustainably (Agenda 21: 40.11).

At the time library movement began, books and education were scarce commodities. Today, the quantity of information that is generated and distributed is increasing exponentially. The issue of scarcity is superseded now by new problems of access. But the essential function of the library has not changed: to offer knowledge and information to the average citizen who cannot afford, with individual resources alone, to secure all the information necessary to meet his or her self-defined needs in a complex and challenging world (Conable, 2007). In this way, libraries provide tangible commitment by collecting, organizing, preserving, disseminating, and protecting everyone's rights of access to the richness of human expression in all its recorded forms. This responsibility goes further to justify the existence and support of libraries than any of the many other roles and functions

that libraries fulfill within their communities. Access is defined as a means of approaching, entering or coming in contact with something. While analyzing legal provision on access to archival document, Abioye (2002), quoting Hinchey and McCausaland (1987), maintains that 'access' refers to the terms and conditions of availability of records or information. Morrison (1995) emphasized that there is danger in not allowing people to have access to proper education facilities.

Accessibility of information sources is an important recurring theme in the literature. Kuhlthau (1991) argues that the choice to seek information depends on its perceived accessibility. According to Aguolu and Aguolu, (2002) resources may be available in the library and even identified bibliographically as relevant to one's subject of interest, but the user may not be able to lay hands on them. One may identify citations in indexes, but may not have access to the sources containing the relevant articles. The more accessible information sources are, the more likely they are to be used. Researchers such as Slater (1963), Allen (1968), and Rosenberg (1967) had earlier validated through empirical studies the observations that readers tend to use information sources that require the least effort to access. The user may encounter five possible types of inaccessibility. They are conceptual, linguistic, critical, bibliographic, and physical inaccessibility. Aguolu and Aguolu, (2002) note that availability of an information source does not necessarily imply its accessibility, because the source may be available but access to it is prevented for one reason or the other. Osundina (1974) studies the relationship between information accessibility and library use by undergraduates in Nigeria and notes that the problem of Nigerian students is not the question of wanting to use the library, but whether or not the university library can provide for their needs, and whether there is access to what is provided. Ajayi and Akinniyi (2004) found frustration among information seekers due to the non-availability of sources. In a study of information needs of library users, Oyediran-Tidings (2004) attributed low use of library to the expressed unavailability of desired information resources.

Information Retrieval is the science of locating, from a large document collection, those documents that fulfill a specified information need [ Frakes & Baeza-Yates, 1992; Salton, 1989; van Rijsbergen, 1979]. Information retrieval is the area that deals with the storage, organization, management and retrieval of information, where the goals of continual search in the field is to find better methods of doing the same (Azzopardi &Vinay, 2008). Libraries as repositories of intellectual products play a fundamental role in ensuring that national information are collected, organized, stored and preserved for the use of posterity. Aguolu and Aguolu, (2002) have rightly observed that libraries are social institutions, created to conserve knowledge; preserve the cultural heritage; provide information; and to serve as fountain of recreation; undergird and underpin education and research. In support of this opinion, Ajidahun (2004) declared that 'the mission statement of any library is the provision of excellent information services to its users'. According to the author, the user is the focal point of the entire library and information services. A library is adjudged to have achieved its mandate only when its users are satisfied with the services offered to them. Any library that cannot meet the information needs of its users is a moribund and anaemic information system because it has lost its vitality, honour and attractions (Ajidahun, 2004). This is why academic libraries must strive hard to assuage the intellectual and information thirst and curiosity of their users by acquiring and processing various reading materials for the use of their patrons in order to justify their continual existence and relevance.

Studies have provided information on the variables involved in information seeking behaviour of scholars. Patitungkho and Desphande (2005) have identified a number of

variables that come to play in information seeking process. These include: type of materials, purpose of seeking information, and methods used by scholars in seeking information. Others are reasons for seeking information and problems faced in the process. The study however reveals that libraries have vital roles to play by being the institution that bear stewardship responsibility for information.

For the libraries to assist in the promotion of access to knowledge, they must help to identify, locate and deliver information or document sought by the researcher (Aguolu and Aguolu, 2002). The identification and location of information pertinent to the user's inquiry depends upon the availability of effective bibliographic apparatus in general and specialized fields. To facilitate identification and location of information materials in the libraries, the library is expected to provide effective access tools as catalogues, bibliographies, guides, indexes and abstracts. According to Olorunsola (2008), nothing frustrates a researcher more than trying to retrieve an article, which seems right on target, only to find that the library does not own the journal. This study examines the important problems encountered by users in accessing and retrieving PO materials at KDL.

## Statement of the Problem

Over the years KDL has, to varying degrees, acquired a broad range of publications and titles published in Nigeria and Africa, about Nigeria by Nigerians or people from other countries and these constitute a significant component of the overall library resources. These materials are housed in the PO Unit in the Reference Section of the Library. It is one thing for a library to acquire relevant and balanced academic materials/ collections and another to ensure that the materials are organized and arranged in a helpful order for the user to effectively access with minimum efforts. Despite the fact that the materials in the PO Unit are rich, indigenous, highly relevant, and capable of promoting impactful and sound academic activities, it is very obvious that the materials might have been underutilized and perhaps effectively kept from the users due to the following reasons:

1.  the arrangement of materials on the shelves is done according to date of arrival rather than by subject classification. This makes it impossible for related subjects to be brought together for easy access;
2.  due to the peculiar arrangement of the materials, only highly experienced staff ( many of whom have retired) can assist users in accessing the materials;
3.  the catalogue is not up-dated as large volume of materials have not been processed; and
4.  the unit is usually under lock and key due to the aforementioned reasons.

In a proposal for the reorganization of the PO and Government Documents collections, one of the authors, C. O. Ola, (who incidentally is the Reference Librarian) noted:

*"The close access collections in the reference section of the Kenneth Dike Library (KDL) include: Africana, Government documents, newspapers and magazines, Publication Ordinance and Thesis. The collections are very important and very highly consulted by users – Lecturers, researchers and students. This is why they must be well organized. Unfortunately, most of them are in decrepit situation which requires that we declare a state of emergency on the collections in order to reorganize them and put them within easy reach of our users. Most of the newspapers are already brittle;*

*others are kept on bare floor while some others have become tattered from overuse and careless handling. The Publication Ordinance (P.O.) materials are dumped in carrels and therefore not in any form of arrangement that can make them accessible to those who need them. The Africana and Government documents are not well catered for. Even the staff collection is in total disarray. It is therefore apt that a programme be drawn for the restoration and reorganization of these collections."*

These claims in the proposal support the problems being highlighted in this paper and are against the principles of librarianship as postulated by Dr. Ranganthan, the Indian librarian on whose theories, librarianship practices are based. The principles state:

- Books are for use
- Every user his book
- Every book its user
- Do not waste the time of the library users
- The library is a growing organism.

These principles have implications for the organization of library materials in order to promote access to information. This can be done in the library by applying standard tools and techniques to ensure that related information materials are organized and placed in conspicuous and helpful order for the users to locate. The present state of PO collection in most Nigerian university libraries is not in any way suggestive of the application of these governing rules. Much time is being wasted by users who, more often than not, are not allowed physical access to the materials and are forced to wait for an assistant that may not be able to help in retrieving needed materials. The library as a growing organism has implications for the application of up-to-date and latest technology for the organization, retrieval and dissemination of relevant information. Against this background, this paper is aimed at examining the importance, accessibility and retrieval of PO collection in learning, teaching and research activities in the University of Ibadan.

**Research Methodology**

The study which is targeted at users of PO materials, adopted the survey research design in examining the importance, accessibility and retrieval of PO materials in KDL, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The main instruments for data collection were structured questionnaire and the PO users' log note book. The logbook shows that 2539 users who are graduate, undergraduate, academic and non academic staff and users from other institutions consulted the materials between October 2009 and September 2010. This forms the population of this study from which a sample size of four hundred (400) users comprising of postgraduate, undergraduate, academic and non academic Staff and members of other institutions participated in the study. Thus, 400 copies of structured questionnaire were distributed accordingly. The questionnaire was administered at the undergraduates and postgraduates' sections and at the reference desk of the library within two months.

**Result**

A total of 400 copies of questionnaire were administered, 340 representing 85% were retrieved and found valid for data analysis. The questionnaire was analysed using Statistical

Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) and results presented in tables and simple percentage count.

**Table 1: Are you aware of the availability and use of PO Collection in KDL**?

| Respondents | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 230 | 68% |
| No | 66 | 19% |
| No response | 44 | 13% |
| **Total** | **340** | **100%** |

The study shows that majority of the sampled users are aware of the availability and use of PO materials in the library.

**Table 2: How often do you use PO Materials in the library?**

| Variables | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Frequently | 46 | 14% |
| Very frequently | 51 | 15% |
| Hardly | 137 | 40% |
| Never | 72 | 21% |
| No response | 34 | 10% |
| **Total** | **340** | **100** |

The table reveals that majority of the users sampled hardly use PO materials in the library. While 15 % of the respondents claimed they use the materials very frequently, 21% have never used the materials.

**Table 3: How would you describe retrieval process of PO materials in the library?**

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Easy** | 71 | 20.5% |
| **Very easy** | 31 | 9% |
| **Difficult** | 172 | 50.5% |
| **Very Difficult** | 54 | 16% |
| **No Response** | 12 | 4% |
| **Total** | **340** | **100%** |

From the table above, it is understood that the retrieval of PO materials in KDL is not very easy as majority of respondents described it as difficult.

**Table 4: Physical access to the P.O. Collection**

| Allowing users to have Physical access to the P.O. Collection | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Waste users' time** | 86 | 25% |
| **Saves users' time** | 33 | 10% |
| **Leads to greater confusion** | 9 | 3% |
| **Helps users in discovering related materials** | 175 | 51% |
| **No Response** | 37 | 11% |
| **Total** | **340** | **100%** |

The table above suggests, to a large extent, that allowing users to gain physical access to the PO collection may waste users' time but put them at the advantage of discovering related materials on the PO shelves. Access to the library shelves encourages browsing.

**Table 5: How important are P.O. materials?**

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Important** | 149. | 45% |
| **Very important** | 96 | 28% |
| **Not important** | 62 | 18% |
| **Not very important** | 15 | 4% |
| **No response** | 18 | 5% |
| **Total** | **340** | **100%** |

The table above shows that Ibadan collection of legal deposit materials published in Nigeria is uniquely rich, valuable for research and very important to the users.

**Table 6: I use P.O. materials for**

| Variable | frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Class assignments** | 67 | 20 |
| **Teaching** | 39 | 11.4% |
| **General information** | 86 | 25% |
| **Research** | 133 | 39 |
| **No response** | 15 | 4.4% |
| **Total** | **340** | **100%** |

The table above shows that PO materials in Nigerian university libraries are used researchers and other information seekers

**Table 7: Statistics of Use of PO Materials from October, 2009 to September 2010**

| Months | Graduate/ Research | undergraduate | Academic Staff | Non academic staff | Others institutions | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Oct. 2009 | 36 | 20 | 17 | 9 | 8 | 90 |
| Nov. 2009 | 98 | 63 | 48 | 40 | 85 | 334 |
| Dec. 2009 | 75 | 55 | 51 | 46 | 51 | 278 |
| Jan. 2010 | 50 | 38 | 16 | 24 | 54 | 182 |
| Feb. 2010 | 44 | 39 | 19 | 11 | 59 | 172 |
| Mar. 2010 | 89 | 65 | 11 | 37 | 48 | 250 |
| Apr. 2010 | 67 | 38 | 18 | 17 | 55 | 195 |
| May 2010 | 41 | 36 | 29 | 34 | 38 | 178 |
| Jun. 2010 | 72 | 50 | 39 | 38 | 44 | 243 |
| Jul. 2010 | 80 | 55 | 26 | 24 | 57 | 242 |
| Aug.2010 | 64 | 48 | 28 | 26 | 41 | 207 |
| Sep. 2010 | 69 | 34 | 15 | 17 | 33 | 168 |
| **Total** | **785** *31%* | **541** *21%* | **317** *I12%* | **323** *13%* | **573** *23%* | **2539** *100%* |

The table of statistics above shows the use of PO materials for a period of one year-from October, 2009 to September 2010. The table reveals that 2539 requests were successfully responded to within the period and majority of users of PO materials were researchers/ graduate students. This is followed by users from other institutions and undergraduate students.

**Discussion**

The study which is aimed at investigating the accessibility, retrieval and use of PO materials, found that majority of library users in the University of Ibadan is aware of the availability of PO collection. The study revealed that only few respondents sampled use the materials while majority hardly use the materials. The study established that the retrieval of the materials is not very easy as majority of respondents described the process as difficult. This might have been responsible for the inability of users to maximize its use.

On direct physical accessibility to PO materials in the library, the study found that allowing users to gain physical access to the collection in order to search for materials may waste users' time but encourages shelf-browsing and the possibility of discovering related materials on the shelves. Accessing the library shelves encourages browsing. Shelf-browsing in the library has been defined by Olorunsola (2008) as the process of searching for materials of relevance to one's subject of interest, often without precise subject terms under which to search. In the words of Line (1995), "browsing has been compared with looking for a needle in a haystack and finding the farmer's daughter". Users tend to find more valuable materials through browsing. In open access systems, browsing is almost universally practiced and is much appreciated by users. It exposes researchers to current materials and this is very important as it enables researchers to keep abreast of new development on and beyond the fingers of their own discipline. The study revealed that PO materials are important and very useful for research and general information.

**Conclusion**

The acquisition of national information through PO law in Nigerian University Libraries can only be useful if the materials are properly organized and made accessible to users. The ability to access information is especially vital in rural and marginalized areas. Libraries can promote indigenous development solutions that address problems specific to their regions, nations or communities by providing access to international information resources as well as locally developed knowledge (Baker, 2006). Through providing access to, and acting as repositories of indigenous knowledge, Nigerian university libraries can strengthen local communities by helping them develop their local solutions for their development challenges and by creating viable and user-friendly access to publications of indigenous and cultural character, especially PO materials. Agenda 21 calls for use of indigenous knowledge and approaches when appropriate to provide local communities and resource users with information and know-how they need to manage their environment and resources sustainably. In all, PO can enhance the preservation of indigenous knowledge and national cultural heritage.

**Recommendations**

The study recommends that:

- PO collection should be reorganized and catered for
- Appropriate and adequate document classification scheme should be applied to bring related documents together for easy access.
- Appropriate software and hardware needed for close access documents automation should be procured in KDL
- Users should be allowed physical access to PO shelves since it encourages shelf-browsing and helps them in discovering related materials.
- Magazines and Newspapers should be digitized in order to increase users' access to the information they contained, save space and preserve the information.

From the foregoing, it becomes imperative that if Nigerian university libraries are to provide essential support for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and stimulate cultural development, help improve educational and social skills, further reading habits, information literacy and promote education, public awareness and training, it must acquire vast collections and variety of media and offer guidance and learning opportunities for their exploitation.

If Nigerian university libraries are to be indispensable in an information society, and for sustained participation in democratic decision-making process, contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help safeguard basic democratic values and universal civil rights, they should identify, respect and protect individual right to information and privacy of their users without discrimination.

To this end, Nigerian university libraries should not only acquire information material, but preserve and make available to all users without discrimination the widest variety of materials, reflecting the plurality and cultural diversity of the Nigerian society and the richness of the environments through proper organization and application of modern tools and techniques for accessibility and retrieval.

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