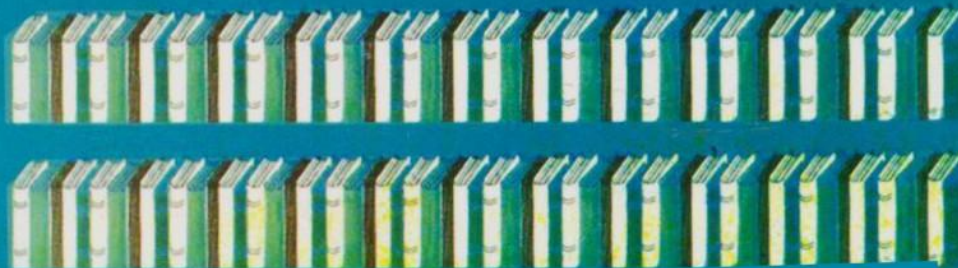
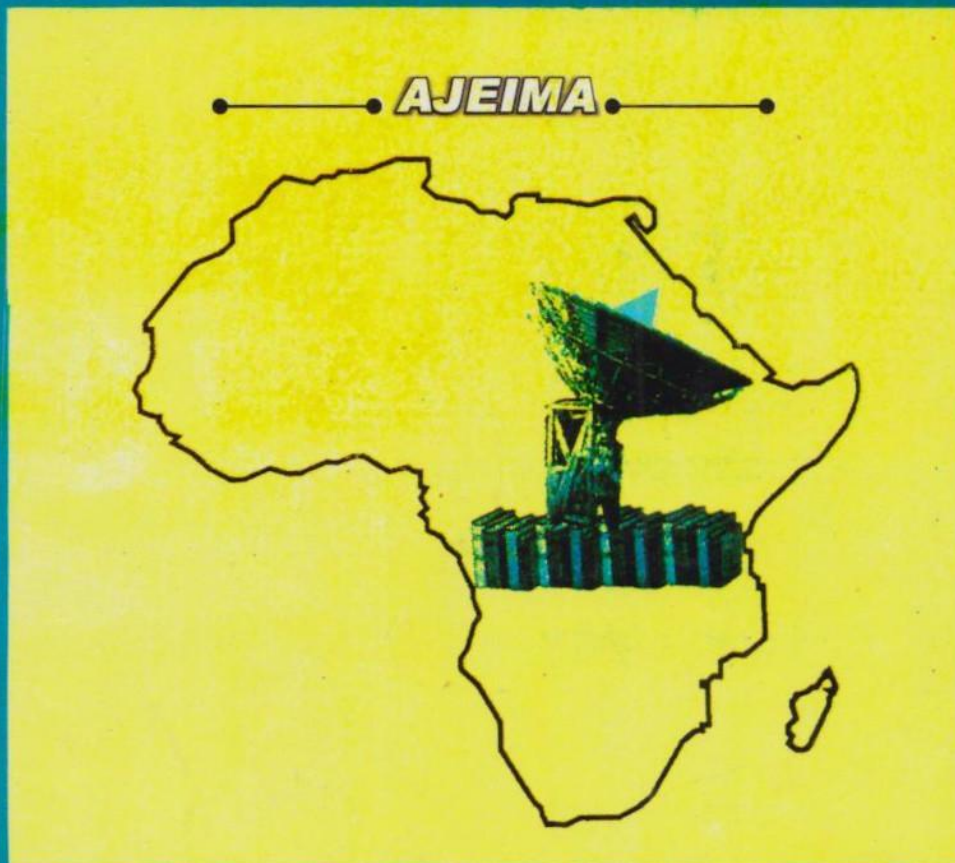


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Quality Assurance Mechanisms and Information Services Delivery in University Libraries

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Abstract

The quality of education and level of growth in any university depends on the quality of services offered in the library. Many universities seem to develop less rationally than anticipated and as such are today producing effort that may not guarantee standard service delivery in libraries. This calls for adoption of quality assurance mechanisms which aim at ensuring credibility in library services delivery. This paper therefore focuses on how quality can be enhanced and assured in university libraries by examining the concept and mechanisms of quality assurance relating to library services. Also, the paper suggests that library services should be improved. Library managers, unit heads and the entire stakeholders should assume their responsibilities for the adoption of internal organizational mechanisms and external regulatory mechanisms to guarantee quality service delivery.

Introduction

The concern for quality in Nigeria university libraries is most desirable for obvious reasons. University library is the parent institution's hope for sound and qualitative education. It is saddled with the responsibilities of providing quality information sources and services that will meet the information needs of the entire members of the host environment. The establishment and development of academic libraries have always been in total agreement with the functions of the universities where they are situated. Aside the basic traditional functions of teaching, research and community services, Etim (2010) enumerated other functions of the university to include:

- (i) Pursuit, promotion, and dissemination of knowledge,
- (ii) Provision of intellectual leadership,
- (iii) Manpower development,
- (iv) Promotion of social and economic modernization,
- (v) Promotion of intra and inter-continental understanding.

These functions serve as guide to the formulation of academic library objectives which are as follows:

- (a) Provision of resources for learning-teaching activities, external and collaborative research and personal self-development.
- (b) Provision of expensive standard works in professional disciplines.
- (c) Provision of specialized information on the region within which the university is situated.
- (d) Cooperation with other academic libraries to develop a network.

It is worthwhile to note that the extent to which these objectives can be achieved depend to a large extent on

the quality consciousness of the entire staff, and the university authority. Quality assurance mechanisms adopted in any library brings about tremendous changes in services provided by such a library. Thus, Edet (2007) pinpointed three major areas that demand optimum attention for quality library services. The major areas, which consist of assorted variables are Resources: information content; Organization: service environment and resource delivery; and Services delivered by staff. Suffice therefore to say that a university can measure up its services if quality is assured in the three major areas. In practice, many university libraries seem to develop less rationally than anticipated, and as such are today producing efforts that may not guarantee quality service delivery in libraries. Consequently, this paper focuses on how quality can be enhanced and assured in university libraries by examining the concept and mechanisms of quality assurance in library services.

Concepts of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance in library is the process of determining or verifying whether library services meet or exceed the clientele expectations (Edet, 2007). This simply means the fitness of a library in accomplishing the goals for which it is set up and also maintaining comparable standards. Okebukola (2005) noted that quality assurance could be judged from ascertaining how good and efficient the staff are, the facilities and resources needed for effective learning process are, and how prepared the users are in meeting the challenges in the field of work. Certainly, quality assurance brings

about tremendous changes in library services. This trend can be attributed to increasing challenges in libraries due to competition from the world of information technology, which has caused users to expect more in terms of information service delivery. The author therefore summarizes the purpose of quality assurance in library and information sector as follows:

- 1) Provision of relevant information resources in all the courses offered in the university.
- 2) Giving credibility to the library management.
- 3) Ensuring accountability in respect of the expenditure of library funds.
- 4) Engendering of confidence in acquisition resources.
- 5) Enhancing quality and standard in the total library serves.

Also, Ugodulunwa and Mustapha (2005) stressed the need for quality assurance, asserting that the process should be taken as a major task for every organization including the library. It is worth noting that while quality assurance verifies that any customer (offering services or products) should offer services with the highest possible standards. It therefore requires collaborative efforts by university authorities, library staff, governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as researchers. In the light of this, all stakeholders are expected to be responsive, alert and flexible in their responses to the need of patrons which the library serves.

A study conducted by Edet (2007) to determine the influence of quality information services on users' satisfaction in university libraries revealed that library users lay much emphasis on accessing information

worldwide via internet, speed of delivery and reliability of services offered in terms of consistency and accuracy. Staff demeanor in terms of being available, courteous, approachable and friendly was seen as a determinant of quality services delivery in any library. This of course is to say that the reliability and security of services offered cannot be overlooked if the library must achieve its objectives.

Quality assurance is a process-driven approach with specific responsibilities which are beyond the overall duty of making policies and defining broad goals. It therefore behooves all stakeholders especially library managers and unit heads to study these responsibilities which according to Akwang (2007) include the following:

- (1) Reviewing personnel qualifications.
- (2) Training and re-training of personnel.
- (3) Updating knowledge through research.
- (4) Developing, documenting and implementing quality techniques.
- (5) Conducting quality audit within and outside the library.
- (6) Involving in the acquisition and policy review cycle.
- (7) Monitoring and evaluating the implemented quality techniques by testing the results against the predetermined objectives.
- (8) Applying actions necessary for improvement if the results require changes.
- (9) These responsibilities guarantee quality assurance which remains a potent factor for library services delivery.

Quality Assurance Mechanisms

These are operations followed in libraries to enhance quality and standard in service delivery. These fundamental operations are viewed from two broad perspectives namely; internal organizational and external regulatory quality assurance mechanisms.

Internal Organizational Mechanisms

These mechanisms consist of mode of operations that could be undertaken by the library within its boundaries to give confidence that services offered meet the targeted quality standard. Adekeye (2005) identified internal mechanisms as the processes of monitoring, supervision, inspection and evaluation of activities in every sector within an organization for improved result. In a library setting, right actions can be adopted internally to meet the set standards in the following areas:

Library Environment

The appearance of the library and its environment determine the quality of services it offers and also attracts users to patronizing it. Edet (2007) noted that the quality of services offered in the library can be affected and influenced by the outward appearance of the library. Libraries should be comfortable, well lit and ventilated with sufficient space for study and research, thus ensuring quality services. Light painting and decoration with photographs and art works give the library an amiable outward appearance, making it more attractive to users. Ogbonna and Okenyi (2006) added that the site of the library should permit planting of ornamental trees, a good drainage

system, elaborate parking space and clean toilets. In the agitation for quality information service delivery, academic libraries should be made a one-stop shop where users can come and meet other pressing needs within its confines.

Library Facilities

Quality information service delivery demands that appropriate facilities be put in place to promote acquisition, organization, dissemination of quality information and security of library resources. The facilities, according to Edet (2007) include library furniture, photocopiers, printers, computers, fax machines, scanners, registration machines, etc, which should be safe an environmentally controlled with adequate technical support. It is noted that the availability of quality facilities in the library fosters collaborative nature of study and resource sharing; promotes effective and interactive access and use of information resources. Thus, library furniture should offer the best degree of privacy, thereby reducing distraction from other clientele.

It is no gainsaying the fact that the problems of book theft and mutilation work against quality assurance and also influence the library's reputation. Omotayo and Ajayi (2006) noted that apart from the introduction of closed access, the installation of closed circuit television monitor (CCTV) cameras is necessary to curb library crime. Also, for this purpose, the introduction of magnetic strips for books is a welcome measure to be adopted in a library.

User Education

User education plays an important role in maintaining quality service delivery in libraries. It is concerned with educating and informing users by whatever means of the resources and services offered in the library. User education could therefore be summed as assistance or instruction in the proper use of the library (Edet, 2007). It helps most library users overcome their challenges such as how to locate relevant resources from the vast library stock, getting to know the various services offered in the library, and how to solve other possible problems encountered in the library. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) posited that user's education is not normally limited to information about library and its collection and services but includes providing adequate bibliographic awareness in the subject fields relevant to the users. Sharma (2000) suggested the adoption of formal, informal and library committee methods in educating library users on how to get optimum benefit from their libraries. The writer further explained that formal method involves an organized direct contact between the users, usually in groups, and the library staff through lectures and orientation. This type of instruction is mostly integrated into the general academic programmes of the university. The informal method constitutes the teaching and reference function of the library staff. This type of instruction is usually individualized and most effective in developing library use competency.

Information Services

The university library is saddled with the responsibility of providing

varied and up-to-date sources to meet the information needs of its users. With the evolving technological innovations and variety and abundance of information resources available today, the librarians' concern is to provide professional guidance and assistance through his services. These services which involve production, repackaging and dissemination of information will help users find solutions to their numerous academic puzzles and information needs with minimal effort and maximal speed. Suffice therefore to say, that users prefer libraries that provide standard information sources (print and non-print) in terms of content, currency, format, organization, quantity and diversity of needs.

Information services are inexhaustible to include document delivery/lending services, Internet/e-mail services, question and answer services, reference and bibliographic services, etc. The ability to provide quality information services depend largely on the services' means, audience, location, skills of the library staff and the quality assurance approach adopted. Most of these services rely on computer-based technologies for information delivery. Considering these facts, Lee (2005), noted that there is an increase in user's preference to online resources. Thus librarians should continuously monitor the academic environment, evaluate the library services to provide quality customer focused results.

Staff Professional Niche

Staff are the backbone and indispensable tools in quality service delivery. It is obvious that a library that acquires relevant resources and with appropriate facilities but no competent

staff to provide the services needed is offering a fruitless effort. The American Library Association (ALA) code of ethics states that a library should make available qualified and competent personnel to meet the information needs and expectations of the community. Edet (2007) revealed that librarians' professional demeanor is an influential factor on information service delivery. A librarian should create and maintain a user friendly atmosphere by offering to help regardless the user's request, age, gender, ethnic affiliation, race, disability or language proficiency. An information service staff should be competent in information technology and interpersonal communication skills.

It is so clear that librarians with the right kind of attitude, appropriate knowledge and skills could transform the worst library into a highly functional institution that offers quality service. It is thus recommended that university management should recruit high quality personnel in the library to give the users maximum satisfaction so as to gain the confidence of library users.

External Regulatory Mechanisms

The external regulatory mechanisms that could guarantee quality information service delivery in university libraries are:

- 1) Establishment of new programmes
- 2) Accreditation exercise
- 3) Institutional audit
- 4) Research assessment exercise

Establishment of New Programmes

Library is the intellectual powerhouse which generates and provides

information resources and services to support all academic programmes offered by the parent institution. From the fore going, it can be deduced that prior to the establishment and approval of any programme in the university, the library is expected to acquire adequate information resources in that regard. This of course, is among the Nigeria Universities Commission (NUC) guidelines which states that there should be adequate and relevant resources in the library to support all academic programmes. The Nigeria Universities Commission, in determining minimum academic standard for universities, ensures that the library stock is comparable with the programmes in the university and minimum standards obtainable in the best university libraries in the world. It is believed that if universities subject their proposed academic programmes to various levels of scrutiny before the establishment of such programmes, the library will provide information resources and services needed to equip the users with the required knowledge, skills and competencies.

Accreditation Exercise

Accreditation exercise is a concerted and coordinated effort carried out to stimulate, assist and guide the continued growth of programmes in universities. This exercise aims at maintaining quality and standards in Nigerian universities. To this end, the National Universities Commission was mandated by the Federal Government to set up minimum academic standards for all programmes taught in universities, verify and accredit such programmes. The NUC produced Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) document

which is used as a reference tool for accreditation exercise. One of the facets considered in the MAS document is the library. The National Universities Commission works to ensure that university libraries offer quality services and resources to suit all academic programmes.

Professional bodies either independently or as team members with NUC is a feature in quality assurance through accreditation exercise. Lawal (2002) noted that the Governing Council of the Librarians' Registration Council (LRC) should as a matter of priority implement section 9 of the Decree establishing the Regulation and Practice of Librarianship, which empowers the council to approve institutions equipped for establishing library and information science programme. The author further stated that the involvement of approved professional bodies in the accreditation exercise will ensure upholding of standards and regulate input of sufficient knowledge and skills for different programmes. These laudable efforts on quality assurance can only be completed by the desired changes in university libraries.

Institutional Audit

This is a directive whereby a visitor goes with his entourage or selected government officials to inspect and evaluate the activities of the university and its buildings. The visitor who may be the President or any other federal personality in the case of Federal Universities, Governors for state universities visit relevant units/departments to inquire into the extent to which the quality *arrangements are in operation to ensure* acceptable quality and standards in

teaching and learning process, it is worth noting that library as the heart of an institution is a "must-visit" department.

Such visits to the library reveal how the Library Development Fund (LDF) is spent and of course, the need for re-negotiation from its present 10% level of total recurrent grant (Lawal, 2002). The author also asserted that over 90% of Nigerian Universities are funding libraries well below the stipulated ten percent especially in cash-strapped Federal Universities and the impoverished state counterparts. The author suggested a biennial audit of funds by the NUC to ensure proper disbursement of funds to appropriate units. Also, the visitation helps to assess the quality of services rendered in the library and justifies how it best contributes to the fulfillment of the institution's objectives. The judgment and the standard recorded in such visitations could keep the university including the library services up to the standard mark of quality assurance.

Research Assessment Exercise

The purpose of this exercise is to distribute public funds for research competitively based on quality research. Recently, the NUC's Central Research Funds Scheme (CRFS) in the university system is charged with facilitating research work by providing adequate print and non-print current resources in support of both external and collaborative research. The entrenchment of this exercise could increase the research output of the lecturers as the articles written by these lecturers may be published as journals (online or in-print) and subscribed to, *for the library.*

The Nigerian Library

Association in its bid to promote and encourage bibliographical study and research and library co-operation must see to it that research assessment exercise is conducted in Nigerian university libraries. Presently, the University of Uyo serves as an institutional repository for all science and technology based researches in higher institutions in Akwa Ibom State under the World Bank assisted STEP-B project. The World Bank endorsed and recommended this project and many others in many universities to promote quality research output in Nigerian universities. The library must take advantage of this exercise to maximize the availability and accessibility of relevant resources to its users to guarantee quality assurance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The quality of library services delivery has been of great concern to all involved in the teaching and learning process in Nigerian universities. It is worth mention that without adopting appropriate quality mechanisms to satisfy stated or implied information needs of students, researchers, teaching and non-teaching staff, the entire university system will fail. Therefore both internal and external mechanisms should help put in place a system of quality which is based on complete overhaul in library services.

To achieve this, it is recommended that:

- (a) All library stakeholders must be quality conscious, understanding their functions and responsibilities in the quality assurance process.
- (b) The Library Development Fund (LDF) should be increased and

audited by the NUC at least twice a year.

- (c) The state branch of the NLA should organize seminars /workshops from time to time to expose librarians to current strategies in the practice of librarianship.

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