Challenges of Providing Information Services in an Academic Library: The Need for Decentralization

Bukky F. Asubiojo[1] Abiola A. Okunlola [2]

Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria[1,2]

femibuk@yahoo.co.uk [1] amoabiola@yahoo.co.uk [2]

Abstract:

Purpose: The study was carried out to look at the development of departmental libraries springing up in many faculties, departments and units of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife Nigeria without the authorities' approval and answer the question: do students prefer to use departmental library reader than the main library?.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Five objectives were set. Six faculties were selected for the study. The faculties were: Agriculture, Basic Medical Sciences, Clinical Sciences, Environmental Design and Management, Science and Technology. Both questionnaire and oral interviews were used to collect data. The choice of oral interview was based on the assumption that some of the faculty/ departmental library staff might not be conversant with certain library terms and operations in which case it would be necessary to interact and explain key issues to them. The study used simple percentage distribution for data analysis. Four hundred copies of questionnaire were distributed to student library users with a return rate of 97% and 20 copies of questionnaire were distributed to library staff with a return rate of 99%

Findings: Results showed that there were reading rooms or designated places tagged departmental libraries all around the faculties. The result also showed that only faculties of Environmental Design and Management and Clinical Sciences had likely standard faculty libraries. The study further revealed that over the years departments have introduced the departmental library system manned by either students or staff of the departments. The analysis showed that 56.25% of respondents had preference for departmental libraries as opposed to 43.75% in favour of centralized libraries.

Implication: The major implication points to the fact that there is a need for university libraries in Nigeria especially the Obafemi Awolowo University library and academic librarians in general to promote library and information services in their domain first, in the interest of students and also in order to cope with the challenges posed by growth and expansion in the various institutions.

Originality/Value: The paper happened to be the first of its kind in the Obafemi Awolowo University and in it, it was recommended that all faculty and departmental libraries scattered all over the campus must be centrally controlled by the main library and that the university administration must come up with clear policies on the establishment and maintenance of departmental and faculty libraries

Keywords: academic libraries, decentralization, departmental libraries, faculty libraries, information needs, information services, main library

Introduction

A major reason for the establishment of any academic library is to serve its primary users by meeting their information needs effectively, economically and without wasting any time, but when libraries are not within easy reach of their clients the users are left to grapple with the problems of sourcing for information anyhow. Availability and accessibility of information materials and services are perhaps the worst challenges confronting most of the Nigerian academic library users, especially at the Obafemi Awolwo University where staff and students spend money to travel down to where the central library is located waste precious time looking for information. Bringing library services closer to the faculty members and students, even in the age of ICT, is still paramount. Library building should also be easily accessible to users.

The Obafemi Awolowo University has, as a matter of policy, maintained a central library

system since the 70s. However, over the years departments have introduced the departmental library system run by either students or staff of the departments all on their own. Some of the guidelines for establishing university libraries state that undergraduate libraries have been established with the primary purpose of meeting the library and information needs of undergraduates who are enrolled in the large university environment (ACRL, 2003). Establishing libraries in the academia without consideration for location, proximity and convenience will simply nullify this provision. Therefore in a large university campus there must be more than just a single university library no matter how large or well-stocked it is. There should be faculty and departmental libraries with the sole responsibility of maintaining academic collections which are properly organized and meant to serve the needs of all academic areas within the faculty. Arguments for centralization must be premised on proximity and campus size. Library systems at large university campuses should consist of a main library and several other branch or departmental libraries to facilitate learning and research. The main library may focus on the general needs of staff and students while the departmental libraries concentrate on specific research collections relevant to each faculty.

The Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, Obafemi Awolowo University maintains one main library situated in the centre of the campus (single campus). The library building was completed in 1969 and was originally designed to accommodate 25,000 volumes of physical materials and seat about 1000 readers. The extension was completed in 1983 and now it can only accommodate 2,500 users. However, the library today contains about 600,000 volumes and is expanding rapidly.

The Central Library

The library is focused on the development of new collections to meet the growing needs of new faculties and departments. The university operates the hostel system which accommodates only a small percentage of the student population with some of hostels built close to the library. Overcrowding results in noisy atmosphere which is not conducive to reading. Such is the case in Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, Obafemi Awolowo University where users' bags and wallets are left often littering the entrance of the library and students scramble for seats during sessions. The library can overcome this problem by creating departmental libraries especially for faculties that are distant from the mainstream. A lot of students are hungry for timely information on various subjects and so provision of adequate library resources must be the utmost priority of the university library.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they have been used in the context of this discussion:

Academic libraries: an academic library is defined by Wikipedia as a library attached to an academic institution above the secondary school level serving the teaching and research needs of staff and students. Such a library serves two

complementary purposes: to support the school's curriculum, and to support research of the university faculty and students. The support of teaching requires material for class readings and for student papers. In the past, the material for class readings, intended to supplement lectures as prescribed by the instructor, has been called reserves. In the period before electronic resources became available, the reserves were supplied as actual books or as photocopies of appropriate journal articles..(Wikipedia last modified on 26 February 2012 at 12:33.)

Centralisation refers to a situation where there exists only one main library meant to serve all research and academic purposes of both students and staff of an academic institution. It has some advantages. Dekeyser, (1998) explained some of the arguments in favour of centralization as follows: the interdisciplinary of sciences. Certain disciplines make it necessary for many people to go back and forth between several libraries. Since interdisciplinary research is encouraged, it would be much more efficient if all scientific literature could be put together on the same premises. Research collection in some branch libraries may be too specialized for certain faculty members. Departmental libraries often forget their didactic mission and undergraduate students are neglected in library decisions. Most small libraries are understaffed and operate limited opening hours. They often lack specialised services as the single person staffing each library has to be versatile for him to be able to perform all kinds of tasks, from manually shelving the printed material to programming the computers that has become an unavoidable ingredient in a modern library. Centralisation enhances better external services as the community at large becomes more and more dependent on the expertise of the university libraries for their scientific information. Good as these arguments sound they are not sufficient to correct the anomalies created by the non availability of library and information services as at when necessary.

Decentralisation refers in this context to a scenario in which there is a main library in an academic institution supported by other faculty or departmental libraries. It has wide acceptance and it provides the panacea for spatial problems confronting the main libraries of large academic institutions. Fontanin, (2009) submitted that the university of Trieste, Italy operates a library

system which is composed of twelve different libraries which in many cases originated directly within faculties and departments and grew up independently from each other. This has never been the case at Obafemi Awolwo University where the only faculty library then, Faculty of Administration Library was suddenly scrapped many years ago in consonance with the university's policy of a single central library. Bruno, (1971) asserted that some degree of decentralization is necessary and desirable to facilitate instruction and research in order to provide the most useful library service. Decentralisation is a management strategy for effective control of library services.

Departmental libraries in this context represent the libraries attached to the various departments of an academic institution to serve their research and teaching needs. According to the University of Jammu, a Departmental Library may be defined as a subject collection in an academic institution, housed either in a separate room of the main Library or in some building outside the main Library and administered either as part of the centralized Library system or as part of the academic department it serves."Departmental libraries (i.e., Library collection maintained by or for academic departments within faculty) generally are necessary where academic and research units of a university are spread over an extensive campus. So far as administration is concerned, economical management and effective services are obtained when the Library has control and supervision. Though, these may be delegated to responsible personnel over all the book resources of the University "(Jammu University Library, 2009).The establishment of a departmental library is necessary for a number of reasons: to disperse the increased load of centralised services and create room for the provision for a more accessible and a more personalised service. In addition, it helps in the establishment of divisional collections in the humanities, social sciences, medical sciences, education, sciences and other subject areas, as well as provides additional books and reading spaces.

Information service: information services represent the services in support of teaching, learning and research usually provided by the library, archive and other information outlets of an academic institution. The academic library is the academic department responsible for

providing processed or published information on specific topics to an institution's internal users, its customers, or the general public (put source). There are guidelines necessary for librarians to ensure quality control in the provision of information services for the sake of efficiency. Corrall, and Brewerton, (1999) stated that it is expected of an information professional to develop strategies or plans for attaining the stated goals of a library organization which in this case is the provision of efficient and timely information services for the Obafemi Awolowo staff and students. Libraries attached to universities play prominent roles in ensuring that staff and students have access to necessary collections (Kavuiya,2004)

Justification for the Study

The way and manner Faculty/Departmental Libraries are springing up since the mid 1990s and are not under the control of the main university library calls for serious concerns. The growing population of staff and students in Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria calls for a review of how the library and librarians operate within the university campus. For instance when teaching began in Obafemi Awolowo University in October 1962 the total enrolment was 244 which jumped to 27,000 in 2009 and now more than 32,000 students. In fact, the Obafemi Awolowo University campus used to have one or two faculty libraries apart from the main one, but they were suddenly scrapped in the eighties owing to pressures from various quarters. A waiver was granted to the Faculty of Administration in the eighties but later scrapped. A noticeable trend from the early nineties reveals that all the libraries springing from the departments and faculties are not under the management of the main library and can best be described as reading rooms. They do not have qualified staff and lack professional touch.

Objective of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine the process in which Faculty and Departmental Libraries were established independently of the main library.

- To establish the effect of establishing such libraries on overall academic activities of the departments.

- To find out students' perception of Faculty/Departmental Libraries

- To determine the level of preference for faculty/departmental libraries

- To recommend the best ways of setting up such branch libraries.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Six faculties were selected for the study. The faculties were: Agriculture, Basic Medical Sciences, Clinical Sciences, Environmental Design and Management, Science and Technology. The major reason for the choice of these faculties was their distance from the main library. Faculties of Arts, Education and Social Sciences among others enjoy proximity to the main library and so were not included in the purpose of this study. The target population for the study comprised 500 undergraduate users randomly selected from the different reading rooms of the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria during the 2010/2011 academic session and six (6) faculty library staff some of whom are addressed as librarians but without any related qualification. Only 400 undergraduate questionnaires were returned together with the entire six staff questionnaire.

Both questionnaires and oral interviews were used to collect data. The choice of oral interview was based on the assumption that some of the faculty/ departmental library staff may not be conversant with certain library terms and operations in which case it would be necessary to interact and explain key issues to them. The survey was carried out based on the following assumptions

i The current centralized library system in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife is largely inadequate for the provision of library services to all faculties.

ii Library users appreciate and patronize the library more when it is closer to them

iii Provision of information services in the academia must be user-centred.

iv Departmental libraries are being operated by departments and are

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flourishing even though not under the control of the main library

Data Analysis and Discussion

- **Availability of Faculty/Departmental libraries**

Table 1: Availability of Faculty/Departmental libraries

Faculty	Faculty library	Departmental library
Agriculture	1	6
Basic Medical Sciences	1	2
Clinical Sciences	1	1
Environmental Design & Management	1	5
Science	1	8
Technology	1	8

From table 1 above, all faculties have one faculty library each and each department has a departmental library or a reading room denoting a library being run independently of the main library, except in Basic Medical and Clinical Sciences of the College of Health Sciences where some of the units are not running as full degree awarding departments. It is noted however that none of these libraries is manned by a professional librarian.

Table 2: Respondents preference on Library preference: main versus departmental libraries

Library type	Respondent	Percentage
Main	175	43.75
Faculty/Departmental libraries	225	56.25
Total	**400**	**100**

From table 2 above more respondents prefer departmental/faculty libraries to the main library. A total number of 225 (56.25 %) respondents prefer to use departmental/faculty libraries as opposed to 175 (43.75 %) respondents in favour of the main library. Although the margin appears close it is still evident that majority of library users are in support of faculty/departmental library.

Table 3: Reasons for library preference

Reason	Respondent	Percentage
Proximity	357	89
Convenience	327	82
Relevant collection	298	75
Sitting arrangement	201	50
Ease of borrowing	352	88

From Table 3 above it is clear that a great number of library users 357 (89%) desire proximity and walking short distances from their departments to the library, while lots for them 352 (88%) also want easy borrowing. This is probably due to the availability of undergraduate projects which the main library does not hold as a matter of policy. Besides, the charging system used by all the libraries is not according to any standard process and so users could pick any library material from the shelves, use and take out without proper borrowing thereby leaving room for default and misuse of library material.

Table 4: Problems with the main library

Problem	Respondent	Percentage
Inadequate facility	142	35
Overcrowding	298	75
Unsafe cloak rooms	213	53

From table 4 above, we can conclude that overcrowding is a matter of serious concern to library users. A total number of 298 respondents (75%) feel uncomfortable with the problem of

congestion within the main library and would prefer an extension to the existing structure. 53% of respondents prefer to see more secure cloakrooms to keep their bags while in the library. Other users 142 (35%) are bothered about the problem of inadequate facility because most of the available reading and toilet facilities are overstretched especially during exam times.

Table 5: Benefits of Faculty/Departmental Libraries

Benefits	Respondents	Percentage
Access to Internet	97	24
Safety of bags	213	53
Prompt service	346	87

From Table 5 above the greatest benefit from departmental/faculty libraries is prompt service (87%). Library users seem to dislike library bureaucracies usually associated with entering and leaving the library and charging and discharging processes. A good number of students 213(53%) value the safety of their personal effects when using the library but they are not allowed to carry bags and other things apart from books and laptops into the library. Access to the internet in the departmental libraries remains a serious challenge as only the faculties of Agriculture and Basic Medical Sciences and Department of Microbiology libraries have internet facilities comparable to those in the main library. However, the main library has much greater access to online resources than any single unit.

Conclusion

Overall, there seems to be a high preference for faculty/departmental library at Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria. However, most of these departmental/faculty libraries are not being run as they should since they are not under the main library and so lack professionalism. They do not have qualified staff members, adequate resources and loan facilities because none of the library staff in all the faculties has any certificate or formal training in librarianship. They operate only as reading rooms because they lack sufficient funds to acquire relevant titles and journals.

Although the management of the Obafemi Awolowo University approved of a centralized library system as a matter of policy, pockets of departmental libraries could be noticed on campus which is not under the main library. The need for faculties to have decentralised libraries in an institution with a student population of over 30,000 on a campus built on about 5,000 acres (20km^2) of a total of 13,000 acres (53km^2)

cannot be overemphasized. The increasing pressure on the facilities in the main library now demands that supporting libraries be created in the faculties for better library services.

A lot of university students are hungry for timely information on various subjects, and so provision of adequate information should be an utmost priority for the academic library.

Recommendations

This paper is of the opinion that adequate structures must be put in place to facilitate improved access to information and information materials for library users. For this purpose the paper recommends that all faculty and departmental libraries scattered all over the campus must be centrally controlled by the main library. The university administration must come up with clear policies on the establishment and maintenance of departmental and faculty libraries, for instance, all requests for the establishment of any departmental library should be made by the Head of the academic unit through the Dean of Faculty to the University Librarian who in turn will consult with the University Library Committee. Sufficient funds should be released not only for the establishment of departmental libraries but also for maintaining them. All departmental/ faculty reading rooms already established must be upgraded to faculty/departmental library status to enhance effective teaching and learning and to avoid overcrowding and undue pressure on the main library. That will also be in consonance with the National Universities Commission NUC's regulation which states that effective faculty/departmental libraries remain a major criterion for accreditation of university programmes by the Commission in Nigeria

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