



READER SERVICES' OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND STAFF SATISFACTION IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

DR. N. F. K. OBASI

*Department of Library and Information Science,
Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike,
Abia State.*

nenekaluobasi@gmail.com

&

DR. A. U. KALU

*University Library,
Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike,
Abia State.*

maxwellamogu@yahoo.com

Submitted: 13/10/2022

Accepted 05/11/2022

Published: 18/11/2022

ABSTRACT

This paper takes a cursory look at reader services in university libraries in Nigeria. It x-rays the structure, services as well as the challenges of reader services in Nigeria universities as they affect staff satisfaction. The paper did a review of the past and current scenario of the conditions in which staff of the reader services in university libraries have been carrying out their calling of service provision and noted that situations were precarious most of the times and presently have not improved in any remarkable way. Dimensions of service environment of the staff in this division of the library were identified to include their physical and mental work environments, work tools, staff strength and workload. The paper posits that these variables, if they are not given adequate attention, have the capacity to push back the frontiers of quality reader services provision, due to staff dissatisfaction. The paper recommends such things as appreciation and good staff relations among others as strategies for motivating the staff to be their best in a work environment that is yet far from the ideal.

Keywords: Reader services, Staff satisfaction, University libraries, Operational environment

Introduction

Reader services play a pivotal role in service provision to the user community of any library. This service mechanism is the key to the sustainability of user patronage and by extension, the continuous relevance of the library to its host institution. The Reader services are also known as public services or user services. It is a major service division in libraries and its compartmentalization is very visible in large libraries such as the university libraries. Across the globe, the practice has been to give this aspect of library practice, prominence in terms of staff, space, position within the library building, and other variables, all of which are suggestive of the place of these services in the actualization of the mission of the university library on one hand, and the university's mission/vision on the other hand. Reader services are the totality of services that are provided to users, spanning from reference and referral to circulation



of both print and print services, and serials control. According to Okoro and Bamidele (2019), activities and services which take place in this section are enormous to the extent that they are almost close to the activities of the entire library system.

The university library system is a subsystem of the university and it is incumbent upon the library to constantly demonstrate its support to the goals and aspiration of the institution. University libraries perform the tripartite functions of supporting teaching, learning and research mission of the university. Against this backdrop, two things must come to light: either the university library system is fulfilling these objectives or is not doing so. A number of factors would inform the direction in which the library will tilt, such as the information resources availability, staffing, funding, and facilities; and the most important has proven to be the staff dynamics.

Staff of the reader services in the university library are made of professionals, paraprofessionals and non-professionals. Each category is importantly strategic for the overall success of the reader services sub system. According to Aguolu and Aguolu (2002), the paraprofessional and non-professionals put together are greater in number (about 2/3) than the professionals otherwise known as Librarians. This implies that a large chunk of the work in reader services is done by non-librarians. Staff are deployed to this section with this in mind. However, aside this high ratio of the non-professionals to professionals, is the impact of the service environment on the reader services' staff.

Library environment has been identified as a potential index to the optimal functioning of the staff and even the increased patronage and satisfaction of the library users. The university library environment is the totality of tangible and intangible things, and events capable of advancing or diminishing services provision by staff, and user patronage. According to Iroka and Nzeh (2021), 'the nature or the design of the library environment can have positive or negative impact on behavior of the user towards library use. In the same vein, staff become disenchanted when the condition in which they do service is harsh. University library's operational environment is operationalised to mean the building and physical facilities, work tools, working hours, work load, staff relations, and conditions of service.

These environment variables can in no small measure affect service performance of staff members. A harsh, unattractive and staff unfriendly environment can suffocate, stifle and immensely constrain the most competent staff toward service delivery, leading to low or no staff satisfaction. This in turn may lead to loss of confidence of the university library services by users and then user dissatisfaction. Furthermore, university libraries would be gradually losing their relevance before their host. From the state of affairs of university libraries in Nigeria, this appears to be the case most of the time.

A lot of studies have been done on satisfaction of university library services in Nigeria, but the focus of the works has been principally on user satisfaction (Ifidon, 2000; Aguolu & Aguolu, 2002; Oyelekan & Iyortsuun, 2011; Ossai-Onah, Obichere & Iroze, 2013; Kanu & Okezie, 2020). Study focus on staff satisfaction is scarce. While it is true that the library exists for users and should therefore strive to satisfy their needs, it is pertinent to note that staff satisfaction may be heralding user satisfaction. The reader services staff are isolated for this study for the same and more reasons. However, their remuneration and promotion issues are left out here because such matters are not peculiar to them and are not decided somehow by the library



management. Based on the foregoing, the authors looked at reader services, in relation to the dynamics of the staff's service environment in university libraries in Nigeria.

Structure and Services of Reader Services

Typical of university libraries in Nigeria, library services and operations fall under two major facets- the reader services and the technical services. While the technical service is the 'behind the scene' area/entity, the reader service is in the public domain. They make up the circulation, reference, serials, and non-print services. Basically this entity is responsible for serving users directly. In university libraries, the users are undergraduates and postgraduates/researchers, faculty, non-teaching staff and other members of the university community. The centrality of reader services cannot be overstressed as far as library principles and practices are concerned. Corroborating this, Okoro and Bamidele (2019) describe the reader service as the first port of call when a user steps into the library. They describe it as the window or an index for users' perception of the library; defining its role as the flag-ship of the library. They cited Uzuegbu and Arua who averred that the scope and functions of this department targets to meet the mission of the library; which include knowledge circulation, shelf management, user education project, resource services, current awareness services, security, library guides, record/statistics, readers' inquiry, loan, and so on. They maintain that this department (staffers) can attract or deter users by their conduct.

Taking it further, Carmichael (2013) enunciated the current and future role of the public services staff to include: marketing library services, resources and programmes; engaging in scenario thinking, and increasingly remaining as intermediaries in the information discovery process, among others. Obviously, an unmotivated and unenthusiastic reader services workforce is capable of driving backwards the frontiers of library services. The services can be summarized to include the following: circulation of knowledge, user education, answering user queries, receiving new members, linking users to the global information environment, implementing the university's mission, and image maker of the library.

Reader Services and Staff Satisfaction: An Overview

The Nigerian university library system started with the inception of the University of Ibadan (formerly University College, Ibadan) in 1948 being the foremost university in Nigeria. Their librarian was an expatriate: John Harris. Obviously, this scenario suggested lack of indigenous staffing in the university library at that time. It was only when library schools began to emerge, that many indigenous librarians were trained to staff the other university libraries that started to spring up after independence. Currently, Nigeria has 94 public universities and 99 private universities, bringing the total number to 193 (National Universities Commission, 2022).

Unfortunately, the more the universities increase in number, the more students' enrollment skyrockets; stretching available material and human resources. Scholars have increasingly bemoaned the myriad of problems that plagued the university library system in Nigeria, one of which is orchestrated by user population explosion. According to Ifidon (2000), increase in student population is among the challenges that hinders efficient and effective services to users. Ifidon cited a bloated student enrollment in



Ambrose Ali University then, which was about 400% more than the intended population within two decades of its existence. Fallout of this challenge was inadequate space, seating capacity issues, inadequate information materials and inadequate staff. A situation where according to Ifidon, there was too much to do but with few hands.

Reader services staff do a lot of work: shelving, shelf reading, discharge and charging of books. The junior staff or/and paraprofessionals do all these and are also expected to make reservations for users, pick up consulted books in the reading carrels, arrange them for re-shelving, register library users as well as answer simple user queries. In the face of such conditions, the non-reader services staff rarely help out. Okoro and Bamidele (2019) and Ifidon (2000) condemned the nonchalant and uncommitted attitude of these non-reader services' staff when the tasks is much. This is one of the factors that stirs dissatisfaction among the staff of the reader services. In another vein, scholars report that the university libraries in Nigeria pre-occupied themselves with ownership and conservation of information materials at the expense of service provision (Ifidon, 2000). A situation where the staff merely sat down and watched users go to the shelf, comeback to them and borrow materials while the reader services' staff remained passive (Ifidon, 2000; Aguolu & Aguolu, 2002).

It was feared that if this continued, another service alternative could emerge and users would be drawn away from the university library. Twenty-two years down the line after these observations and prediction were made, we witness their manifestation. Today we have a university user community whose default attention when faced with information need, gravitates towards the Internet. This trend cannot be allowed to continue if university libraries are to remain relevant in the scheme of things. It is high time the library profession had a calculated paradigm shift: from a user satisfaction model/perspective to a staff satisfaction one. This is based on the premise that if the conditions in which staff operate are congenial, the unmotivated staff would be motivated; and those sitting on the fence of service provision would take decisive step towards adopting a sound philosophy of service.

Dimensions of Reader Services Staff's Operational Environment

Operational environment of service provision of the staff members are in different aspects. They include the building, the location of the reader's services area, general conditions of service, and staff/employee relations, salaries and promotion, staff development among others. They are significant because they can impact directly or indirectly and negatively or positively on the goals of the university libraries in particular and the academic institution in general. Irokah and Nzeh (2021) suggested a good measure of some control of these environmental forces to ensure a conducive atmosphere for library operations. Salaries, promotions, and other statutory conditions of services are outside the purview of this paper for reason not far-fetched. They apply to every staff of the library, not just the reader services' staff. The focus of this paper are on the ones discussed below:

The Library Building/Physical Environment

The physical environment of the university library encompasses the library building, the location of the building, the reader service area, allocation of offices to the reader service staff, and the furniture and fittings. It also includes ventilation,



temperature control, noise control, and security. According to Iroka and Nzeh (2021), the physical environment includes the building, the premises, the interior architectural design, information materials, noiseless environment, lighting and ventilation. The authors posit that the location of the building and the environment should include such factors as functionality, especially when the library is taking off with an existing structure.

A cursory look at the building situation of universities in Nigeria reveals a lot to be desired. Many of them are not purpose-built especially the new ones, implying that such buildings were not originally designated as a university. It is either that the institution was a defunct college or institute and was later converted to a university. Any relatively large hall becomes the university library. Fortunately, most of our first and second generation universities and their libraries were purpose built. The issue is not even the building getting old as reported by Nwannekanma and Nkoku (2019) but in the outgrowing of their capacity orchestrated by student population explosion. Buildings meant to accommodate 10,000 students are housing more than 40,000 students (Ifidon, 2000), and the increase continues to date.

Today, proliferation of state universities and hurried establishment (or even announcement) of new federal universities would continue to heighten the incidence of non-purpose built universities and library space allocation. Ifidon (2000) confirms that the state universities are the worse hit than the federal in this regard. The resultant effects are limited space for both material and human resources. Despite several standards (CULNU, NUC, and the Building Standard Guide) that have been put in place to check this problem, the universities rarely measure up with them. Inadequate enforcement of these standards by these bodies has culminated in non-librarians taking upper and lead role in library design and building. This was what Quereshi in Nwosu and Okoro (2007) predicted more than a decade ago, that "if professionally prepared standards are not available, librarians run the risk of having standards made for them by people who lack adequate information for arriving at satisfactory conclusion".

A lot of things indeed clamour for library building space: information resources both print and non-print, users, equipment, fittings, and staff. No staff would be satisfied to work under an environment where space for service and for comfort is a far cry from what they should be. Kanu and Okezie (2020) corroborated this fact when citing Ononogbo who opined that an unattractive library physical environment will not fulfill their purpose no matter the neatness of such library's collection. Speaking on the relationship of satisfactory user services and staff satisfaction, Tinuoye, Omeluzor and Akpojofo, cited in Ranawera and Bodhinayake (2018) aver that an effective and productive library and information services to the patrons depends largely on the staff and that such services are easy to provide when the library staff are satisfied with their job.

Staff Strength and Workload

There are three categories of staff that are deployed in the reader services of university libraries, namely; the professionals, paraprofessionals and the non-professionals. The professionals are librarians. They perform professional duties and are involved in policy making and enforcing implementation. They carry out the user education programme and provide leadership for the other staff categories such as the library officers, the library assistants, the porters, and the security. The



paraprofessionals are the library officers while the non-professionals are the library assistants, porters and other junior staff. The non-professionals' work is routine in nature but very strategic in the library system (Opaleke, 2012). Okoro and Bamidele (2019) observed that the reader services system is very large because it comprises other units like the circulation unit which performs a lot of user oriented-functions. Other units of the reader services are the reference, serials, and ICT. The activities covered by these staff are registration of users, charging and discharging of books, shelving and shelf reading; all reference and referral services, serials management, and ICT services including the electronic library services.

The staff disposition in this section matters so much that if due consideration is not taken on their work condition; the library suffers loss- loss of trust, confidence, and then the readers as well as the sponsors. Ifidon (2000) decried the staffing conditions of reader services in Nigerian universities, lamenting the inadequate number of staff, compounded by the too much work left for the few available hands. The author vividly captures what is usually obtainable in the university libraries' reader services especially for the non-professional staff. These staff perform a lot of duties to the point that it is very glaring they are over worked. Ifidon sadly noted that non-reader services staff are not always willing to help out because they do not see themselves as bonafide staff of reader services. The result is work overload for the reader service staff and this adversely affects user services and the staff in question. Babarinde (2013) reported an overwhelming job stress, in his study on stress among library staff. This agrees with the study of Oyelekan and Iyortsoun (2011), who investigated reader services in a Nigerian university and reported that the reader services were found to be unsuitable and unsatisfactory to users.

Work Tools

Work tools are operationalized to consist of all the resources which the staff use in service provision and the associated tools and technologies that aid in easy discharge of such services. These will include audio-visual resources, information and communication resources, circulation stools, trolley, ladder shelves, service counters that are staff-friendly, library automation and OPAC, security gadgets, alarms, Internet connectivity and information materials. Information materials have been found to have significant relationship with satisfaction of users because users desire current, relevant and quality information resources. The same goes for the library staff who enjoy instruments of service that are in good shape. Fortunately, scholars had reported librarians' interest on acquisition of information materials (Ifidon, 2000; Aguolu & Aguolu, 2002). Oyelekan and Iyortsoun (2011) equally reported indices of sufficient availability of information materials with which the staff provided their services.

The issue however was with the currency of such materials. Thus to a reasonable extent, availability of information materials as a work tool for the reader services' staff has been established. The staff are satisfied with this condition. Though, Ifidon (2000) had reservation regarding this when she referred to it as university libraries 'pre-occupying' themselves with acquisition. Aguolu and Aguolu also reported that it was seen as 'the libraries pride'. These authors justified their reservations concerning much premium placed on information resource ownership. They perceived that, obsession in amassing wealth of information resources was at the relegation of service provision and



user education. Despite this fear, it can be said that university libraries in Nigeria have a soft spot for information materials and have been making tremendous attempt at getting them. The reader service staff can at least breath a fresh air in this area of availability of materials with which to carry out their trade.

Another work tool that affects the disposition of staff towards satisfactory service provision is the ubiquitous Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The large volume of work inert in the reader services can be done with ease and speed using information technologies. Through these service enhancers, reader services routines are automated and even remotely managed such that services such as charging and discharging, reservation, overdue management, user registration, user inquiries, Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) can be enabled in the library with or without physical human interface. Ossai-Ugbah and Ogunrombi (2013) rightly described ICT as 'a set of tools that can be used to facilitate access to the entire realm of recorded knowledge not just books'. Similarly, Awe cited in Ossai-Ugbah and Ogunrombi (2013) avers that usefulness of these technologies comes to the fore when it becomes difficult to get results by manual operations due to sheer volume of work. The need to reduce mental and physical exertions in performing services, makes computer and the associated technologies very useful for reader services staff of university libraries.

The experience with university library automation projects in Nigeria is not new. According to Ossai-Ugbah and Ogunrombi (2013), the first university to initiate automation was the University of Ilorin in 1983. The automation of the circulation section was done using the software APPLE 11. Unfortunately, the project suffered a big setback. The author posits that the University of Ilorin's failed attempt was not a lone ranger; similar attempts and failures have been recorded and recurring even at the national level. Early attempts and failures of library automation in Nigeria university libraries included TINLIB automation project for Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, a state-owned university, and the Ahmadu Bello University Kashim Ibrahim Library's attempt. Only University of Jos and University of Ibadan libraries presented good prospects for library automation among Nigerian university libraries then.

In 1994, the National Universities Commission (NUC) came into the scene to standardize automation projects in the Nigerian academic libraries; with the adoption of TINLIB-a library computerization software. The software was installed in 23 Federal universities, with training following the installations. Unfortunately, barely a year after its introduction, the project could not be sustained due to breach of the contract between the software firm and the University libraries and by extension NUC. Little wonder that Ifidon (2000) reported that library automation processes in reader services of university libraries in Nigeria was still at its infancy.

Today, computerization and ICT efforts including Library Apps (Applications) are still being bedeviled by a good number of setbacks such as manpower training needs, non-use of the gadgets, technical problems, space, high subscription fees, low maintenance culture and erratic power supply (Anunobi & Ogbonna, 2012; Yahaya & Kanuba, 2019; Ossai-Ugbah & Ogunrombi, 2013; Obasi, 2012; Aloysius, Awa & Ezema, 2021) This situation would continue to make work unexciting for reader services because of the sheer magnitude of work and users' attention which are involved. In like manner, security personnel attached to the reader services area and the library porters are encumbered with a load of work, sometimes leading to anger and



frustration which may be transferred to users. Their job can be enhanced by the use of security tools such as CCTV, and electronic tagging (Ifidon, 2002), as well as theft detectors.

Conclusion

Reader services in Nigerian universities seem to be at the crossroads, in relation to satisfaction of staff and users alike. A number of factors are glaring, posing as threats to the prospects of a sound reader services. They are lack of adequate funding, over-stretched facilities and staff, management apathy, and non-adherence to standards, to mention but a few. Taking into consideration the centrality of the services of the university libraries to the mission drive of universities in particular and higher education in general, such issues cannot be dismissed with the wave of the hand. Staff matters such as their satisfaction while on duty is as important and as imperative as user satisfaction because user satisfaction hinges on the totality of the library system's health which includes the staff's wellbeing.

Recommendations

Reader services' staff should receive some extra boost because they are strategic to a successful university library system. Appreciation in the best possible way, which may not necessarily cost the university library management any fortune, but would go a long way in motivating these foot soldiers, is an option. Cooperation and collaboration among the entire library staff is a requisite condition for easing stress orchestrated by work overload. Staff and management relations should be cordial. Standards bodies should step up their responsibilities in enforcing standard specifications; while university libraries management should not be reticent in speaking up when violations or non-implementation of these standards become commonplace.

REFERENCES

- Aguolu, C. C., & Aguolu, I. E. (2002). *Libraries and information management in Nigeria*. Maiduguri: Ed- Linform Services.
- Aloysius, D. A., Awa, P. C., & Ezenwa, A. L. (2021). Perspectives and applications of management information systems in academic libraries in Nigeria. *The Research Librarian: Journal of the Nigerian Library Association, Abia State Chapter*, 15, 132-143.
- Anunobi, C., & Ogbonna, A. (2012). Web 2.0 use by librarians in a state in Nigeria. *Developing Country Studies*, 2(5), 7-66.
- Babarinde, B. A. (2013). Stress management among staff of academic and research libraries in Ibadan. *Nigerian Library and Information Review: Journal of Oyo State Chapter of Nigeria Library Association*, 22 (1&2), 46-55.
- Carmichael, L. R. (2013). How I perceive the future of public services in the academic library. <https://www.Slideshare.Net/LisandraRCarmichael/the-future-of-public-services-in-academic-libraries>
- Ifidon, B. I. (2000). Management problems in readers' services: The Nigerian experience. *Archive*, 10(1&2), 1-10.
- Iroka, P. L., & Nzeh, C. O. (2021). Library environment and use of library resources: Abia State Polytechnic, Aba in focus. *The Research Librarian: Journal of the Nigerian Library Association, Abia State Chapter*, 15, 124-131.



- Kanu, C. A., & Okezie, C. A. (2020). Nature of library buildings and challenges to effective users' services delivery in public university libraries in Abia and Imo States. *The Research Librarian: Journal of the Nigerian Library Association, Abia State Chapter*, 14, 13-25.
- National Universities Commission (NUC) (2022). Total number of universities in Nigeria. www.nuc.edu.ng.
- Nwannekanma, B., & Nkoku, L. (2019). Nigerian old varsities' buildings suffer neglect. *Guardian Online*, July, 2019.
- Nwosu, C., & Okoro, O. (2007). *Standards for library and information science programmes in Nigerian universities*. Owerri: Kosoko Press.
- Obasi, N. F. K. (2012). Information and communication technology compliance in library operations and services of academic libraries in Abia State. MLS Thesis, Imo State University, Owerri.
- Okoro, C. C., & Bamidele, I. A. (2019). Readers' services in Nigerian university libraries. In *University Librarianship: Issues and Perspectives in Nigeria*, (pp.273-186). Lagos, Zeh Communications.
- Opaleke, J. S. (2012). Influence of librarians' leadership styles on job specific, task proficiency, demonstrating team performance of subordinates. *Nigerian Libraries: Journal of the Nigerian Library Association*, 45(2), 97-121.
- Ossai-Onah, O., Obichere, C., & Iroze, P. (2013). Undergraduate students' satisfaction with library reference resources and services provided in three academic libraries in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. *Nigerian Library and Information Science Review: Journal of Oyo State Chapter of the Nigerian Library Association*, 22(1&2), 25-37.
- Ossai-Ugbah, N. B., & Ogunrombi, S. A. (2013). Library automation: Experiences of Nigerian universities. *Nigerian Libraries: Journal of the Nigerian Library Association*, 46(2), 1-10.
- Oyelekan, G. O., & Iyortsuun, J. A. (2011). An evaluative study of reader services in University of Agriculture Library, Makurdi. *Information Technologist (The)*, 8(2), 129-138.
- Ranaweera, R. A. A. S., Li, S., & Bodhinayake, D. (2018). Job satisfaction of library staff: A study based on university libraries in Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, 8(3), 53-59. DOI: 10.5296/Ijhrs.V8i3/90.
- Yahaya, A. D., & Kamba, M. A. (2019). Awareness of librarians on the adoption of Library 2.0 applications for service delivery in university libraries in Kano State. *Nigerian Libraries: Journal of the Nigerian Library Association*, 52(1), 23-37.



AUTHORS' PROFILES



Dr. Nene Favour Kalu Obasi is a lecturer in the Department of Library and Information Science, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Nigeria. She holds a Ph.D. in Library and Information Science from the University of Uyo, Nigeria. She had worked at Abia State Polytechnic, Aba, where she headed strategic departments. Her post-NYSC work experience started in the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Education, where she headed the reference library unit. As a result of her outstanding performances in her service year, she bagged a State Award, which culminated in her automatic employment in that State service. Dr. Obasi is a committed member of the Nigerian Library Association and a certified Librarian of Nigeria. She has presented papers in conferences and published in reputable journals.



Dr. Amogu Uma Kalu is a practicing Librarian and certified by the LRCN and holds B.Sc. (Ed.), MLS and Ph.D. in Library and Information Science and Postgraduate Diploma in Public Administration. Dr. Kalu works at Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Nigeria, and earlier at the Abia State Polytechnic, Aba, where he rose to the position of Assistant Chief Librarian, before joining MOUAU. Dr. Kalu is a very active member of NLA, who had served two tenures as Secretary, and a tenure as Financial Secretary, NLA Abia State Chapter, and currently the National Financial Secretary of NLA. His research interest is in cataloguing and classification, bibliography and user services. He has many research publications in reputable journals.