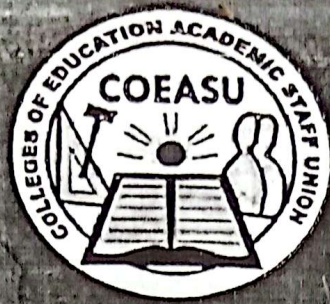




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ACADEMIC LIBRARY SERVICES AND THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The aim of this paper was to examine the role of academic library services and COVID-19. The evolving paradigm shift in information dissemination methods in academic libraries as a result of the outbreak of the coronavirus. It outlines the Implications of COVID-19 on the role of Academic Library Services, Importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in pandemic era, Librarian's role in covid era and the challenges of academic libraries in rendering effective library services. The paper also recommended that librarians need to improve on ICTs skill; Government should fund the library adequately for proper information services to meet users' needs among others.

Keywords: Academic Library, Library Services, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and COVID-19.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as coronavirus pandemic, is an ongoing pandemic caused by the transmission of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Ifijeh& Yusuf, 2020). The pandemic has led to global disruption at an unprecedented scale. Also, its impact on individuals and families is unquantifiable (Mathew 2020) the number of confirmed cases and death rate is staggering and it continuous to rise without having any predicted end and cure.

Considering the outbreak of the virus in Nigeria, significant services were affected that cut across all spheres of life such as Agriculture, Religion, and Education Health and so on. Educational institutions were close to curb the spread of the virus (Ma, 2020). This is due to the traditional ways of academic institution service delivery, including library which is the image of any institution that ought to make information available at any giving time.

The fact is that the COVID-19 pandemic has made academic institutions in Nigeria to know their weakness, working and worked out new ways to fulfil their critical roles in supporting teaching, learning and sustainable development (Ma, 2020). This can only be achieved by the application of ICTs to educational services for adequate information delivery which is the major role of an academic library.

Libraries are collections of books, non-books and book related intellectual records generally known as information, which are selected, acquired, processed, organized and disseminate to patrons in any format at any time. Its organization creates room for easy retrieval of information and use by the patrons.

Information is news or knowledge communicated through the spoken or written word, fate or data. It can also be knowledge gathered from reading or instruction which exists as an idea in people, data in computer files or in various other forms. According to Ebbinghaus, (2011), information is messages transmitted orally or written or as data presented in a document. However, information can be used or applied but must possess an intrinsic quality to qualify for information that will serve a purpose.

The library collection initially majors on traditional or print materials, but more recently. Libraries are understood as extending beyond the physical walls of a building, by including materials accessible through electronic means and by providing the assistance of librarians in navigating and analyzing tremendous amount of knowledge with a variety of digital tools. Through social media, Nigeria academic libraries can respond to queries made by library users and also promote information resources and services to online users (Ifijeh& Yusuf, 2020). It can be argued that in the Nigeria context, the provision of library online will be a monumental challenge because of lack of proper infrastructure, resources and technical know-how, but it is possible to provide library services online in Nigeria.

A case study by Onifade (2020) regarding library services during COVID-19 period at Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (FUNAAB) shows that integrated technology into the library services is possible. She stated that immediately the directive was made for the closure of academic institutions, the academic library at FUNAAB made sure that E-resources were up and running and were available for users remotely without visiting the library. This is a reflective step that must be taken by academic libraries in this era especially in post COVID-19 in Nigeria.

In her article, Onifade (2020) documented the immediate steps taken by the FUNAAB academic library. An excerpt from her publication reads thus:

Users were asked to contact the library through its social media platforms and to also send e-mail to the library for services delivery. Services were also delivered through users WhatsApp platform. Information literacy trainings were conducted for users through zoom, Skype and Google meet (especially for staff from time to time). This was accepted by users and we hope to continue even after pandemic. COVID-19 has made it compulsory for us to provide most of our services online and this is going to be the new normal which we are presently preparing for our staff (Onifade, 2020).

Nevertheless, academic libraries cannot return to their traditional role; there are long-term implication of COVID 19 on academic library service as the pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of academic libraries. Therefore, it's necessary to consider how Nigerian academic libraries can learn from this experience and emerge more useful than ever. The

purpose of this paper is to explore the traditional function of the academic library and highlight steps that can be taken to ensure that future crisis do not impede the academic library from fulfilling its purpose.

Understanding the far-reaching implications of the COVID-19 pandemic requires a consideration of the role of the library before the pandemic. What will be highlighted here concerns what COVID-19 halted and how this affects not just the academic institution but the stake holders and the larger society. This information will help emphasize why changes are necessary for the Nigerian academic library system in post-COVID era. This article provides valuable insight regarding some innovations that can be made. Below are just sample of changes that need to be made, in the hope that they inspire new approaches and continued dialogue on innovations within Nigeria academic libraries.

The Implications of COVID-19 on the Role of Academic Library Services

Due to the advert and increased spread of COVID-19, libraries globally were close down and restricted services offered. These measures were based on risk assessments and adherence to government directives (Okike, 2020). The time when the pandemic will end cannot be predicted, however libraries cannot return to traditional ways of services delivery (Matthew, 2020). But to enhance into the new era of information delivery using ICTs technologies to carry out library services. According to Cox, 2020, "when academic libraries in Nigeria reopen, there must be dramatic and significant changes in concerning how services and products are offered to library users"

The common place practices which have characterized Nigeria academic libraries could disappear and these should be replaced by new modern protocol (Jones, 2020). Academic libraries have a vital role to play in the provision dissemination of genuine information to cure and fight coronavirus to their respective users through the use of ICTs technologies and social Medias. Libraries can provide online services to assist students with access to materials for assignments, select and disseminate information on COVID-19 to researchers, virtual research help, virtual instruction, online reference services, access to e-book and e-journals, linking users to health institutions and organizations information on relating to coronavirus and other health issues, publish a pamphlet and handbills for safety measures against the virus. Recently, and many other Information Technology (IT) and internet companies such as Google, Microsoft and so on have provided free teaching and learning tools to support students and teachers learning at home. For example, Google launched its "Teach from Home Hub" in aid to teachers and learners across the world unable to attend schools (<https://memeburn.com/2020/03/google-teach-from-home-covid-19>).

Importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTS) in Academic Library Services in Pandemic Era

To curb the COVID-19 pandemic, academic libraries were among primary services shut down globally and in Nigeria. Some of these academic libraries transited into the digital space, providing information and support through the mix of information and communication technologies (Daily, 2020). In Nigeria, this have posed a big challenge to academic libraries.

In the post COVID era, there are several means through which academic libraries can use information and communication technologies (ICT) in library operation to make them (library) relevant and to keep functioning. The first step is for the academic library to have responsive and straightforward websites (Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020). The academic libraries website must serve several functions. It must be designed to perform its traditional functions which include information and reference service. It is vital to emphasize that having a website is not enough but the website must meet best standard.

Also, social media is another medium academic library can utilize to ensure they fulfill the mission of the library as repositories of valuable information which is needed to help and support the communities in good as well as challenges and stressful time (Alajmi & Albudaiwi, 2020). Social media networks are an established and proven channel for effective communication. Academic libraries must take advantage of the ubiquity of social media and its ease of use in order to connect with the information needs of the users.

The Librarians role in COVID era

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered how library services are provided; more importantly, the pandemic also has implications concerning the role of the Librarians. In some cases, like in Onifade (2020), Nigerian libraries were asked to work from home, and this proved to be a challenging experience. The experience was challenging because working from required them to learn new collaborative technology like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Docs (Onifade, 2020). Most embraced this immersive learning experience, but for some it was daunting.

Now the COVID-19 pandemic has made it necessary to reconsider the skills and competence of a modern Librarian to ensure that they effectively serve their users (Okike, 2020). Reflecting on how to improve the skill and competence of Librarians within Nigeria higher education institution because in crisis, Librarians disseminate information and can be an invaluable source of authoritative information (Okike, 2020).

To fulfil this new role brought about by the pandemic, Librarians must adapt and be knowledgeable in all fields of human endeavor. Furthermore, Librarians must be proficient at using prints and digital option for information dissemination (Bello and Aghadiuno, 2019). Essentially within Nigerian academic libraries, there must be the adoption of blended Librarianship model which entails that in adoption to the traditional skill set of librarianship, the Librarian must also adopt hardware and software skills to better meet the need of stakeholders (Bell & Shank, 2011). In the post-COVID era, Nigerian Librarian "must reject reference to them as mere custodians of knowledge and information in the national development process and should be part from the action centre in Nigeria's development efforts (Awala-Ale, 2010). There is the need to integrate traditional method of librarianship in our academic knowledge necessary to employ the new digital technology and information format (Bell & Shank, 2007). The social network used by Nigerian libraries should include Facebook, YouTube, Blogging and Whatsapp, telegram, Twitter and others for online education (Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020).

Challenges of Academic Libraries in Rendering Effective Library Services

To effectively discharge their duties and probably maintain relevance during the pandemic and beyond, the academic libraries face some problems and serious setbacks. There are perennial challenges that usually hinder academic libraries from executing information and communication technology-based services in Nigeria. These challenges are inherent because most of the library services available to users during the pandemic anchor on ICT. Literatures have shown that issues of apathy towards libraries and librarians, poor technological infrastructure, inadequate funding, and poor librarians ICT skills should be resolve for libraries to be able to render electronic-based services (Ifijeh, 2014 Mohammed, 2013). Below are few challenges:

Apathy toward libraries and librarians: According to Ifijeh and Yusuf, (2020), within the Nigeria higher education system, libraries are not considered as significant stakeholders. Itsekor,(2021) further emphasized this point, noting that when planning is done regarding other core aspect of the higher education institutions, libraries are often ignored. The fact is that a common practice within Nigeria higher education is to relegate the need and requests of the library to the backburner because the library is not a teaching unit of the institution (Ifijeh& Yusuf, 2020).

Inadequate Fund: ICT development is a capital project and it is intensive and libraries are not exempted from these costs; because it has been established that libraries are poorly funded. To Daniel (2013), observe that lack of funds is the major reason for the underdevelopment of libraries in Nigeria. Nigeria institutions of learning are among the worst hit due to lack of infrastructures to seamlessly migrate to the virtual learning space. Most libraries in Nigeria are trapped in this web. The need to be more intentional and dynamic in rendering libraries services should form major focus of librarians.

Erratic power supply: This is a challenge to information delivery by the library at all-time in respect of the pandemic. The pandemic virtually imposes paradigm shift on the library, transforming its services from traditional to online. For online information dissemination to be effective, all the paraphernalia for information and communication technology must be fully available and functional. This equipment can only function with the use of electricity. The erratic power supply cannot help the issues.

Librarians Skill: Most librarians lack the requisite ICT skill needed. The traditional method of carrying out library services cannot meet the information needs of the users in this era especially in this pandemic era. Librarians in Nigeria are low on ICT skills, and needed to provide efficient library services in support of teaching and learning. The need for librarian to improve their skills in ICT with urgency cannot be overemphasized. Unless librarians take up the challenges of acquiring new skills necessary to operate in an environment of constant change, their future relevance may be in doubt.

Student ignorance: In the absence of physical and limited resource or the availability is limited, the need for accessing e-resources become imperative. Nevertheless, not all the

students are familiar with the use of multiple search platforms to access information and this create another problem of providing information to online user.

Conclusion and recommendation

In conclusion, the coronavirus epidemic has been devastating. However, it has exposed the weakness of academic libraries in Nigeria. Most academic libraries are not prepared for the crises which made them not to function, but few were able to migrate and function in the digital environment seamlessly and many libraries were stalled. They were powerless and not able to provide information to fulfill their goal. The need to be more intentional and dynamic in rendering library services should form major focus of librarians especially in academic libraries.

It is impossible to predict when the next crisis will hit. Nonetheless, the library must begin to prepare. The Nigerian academic library must be dynamic in the rendering of its essential services. This is to ensure that even after the COVID era, the academic library remains relevant.

Base on the review, this study recommends the following:

1. Librarians should develop themselves on the new skills in other to be able to fit in the era of globalization on ICT to meet information needs of their patrons.
2. Government should consider the need to put library as one of their priority when it comes to national development, because an informed society is a deform society.
3. The library users should be educated on the new techniques in the use of ICTs in library services
4. Librarians and library staff should embark on continuous tanning and retraining as the technology grows.
5. Constant power supply to help in the use of ICTs equipment for library services.

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