

Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Year 2008

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University: A Self-Study

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The Information Needs of Faculty Members in a Nigerian Private University: A Self-Study

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Introduction

Prior to 1999, universities in Nigeria were all entities of federal or state governments. General and specialized universities were established by both levels of government. The mission of those universities is to improve literacy, increase scientific and technological research, and train human resources for the developmental needs of the country. The global recession in recent decades has severely diminished the financial resources of Nigerian federal and state governments. While income decreased, governmental responsibilities increased exponentially and university budgets witnessed a steady decline. The result is a dysfunctional infrastructure for research, insufficient classrooms and office accommodations, brain-drain, industrial disharmony, student unrest, instability in the academic calendar, and erosion of academic standards.

With a need to deregulate and liberalize higher education, the government monopoly on the ownership of universities in Nigeria was broken in 1999 with the licensing of the first private universities. Most commenced academic activities almost immediately and have been contributing to the Nigerian nation since then.

Faculty contribute to the attainment of the broad objectives of the university: teaching, research, and community service. Faculty provide academic guidance to students and extend the frontiers of knowledge through research and publication. This makes faculty members' need for information inevitable. Much of this information is acquired, processed, and disseminated through the university library which has been variously described as "the heart of the institution" (Aloh 1988), "a place where books and users interact together for the transmission of civilization and cultivation of human beings" (Adelabu 1973), and "the most important resource in the pursuit of the general goals and objectives of the institution of higher learning" (Nwosu, 2000).

This study explores the information needs of faculty members in one of these private tertiary institutions and also looks for a significant difference between the information needs of faculty members in private and public universities.

Research questions:

- What is the academic rank of respondents?
- What are the information needs of faculty members in Nigerian private universities?
- What sources of information do faculty members rely on?
- What type of publications do faculty members in Nigerian private universities consult?
- What problems do lecturers in Nigerian private universities encounter when searching for information?
- How can the information needs of faculty members in private universities be met?

Madonna University

Madonna University is located at Okija, a few kilometers from the commercial and industrial town of Onitsha in the South-East zone of Nigeria. Because of the license secured from Nigeria's National Universities Commission (NUC) in 1999, Madonna University was the country's first private university and the first Catholic university in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Madonna University Library System (MULS) was established at the inception of the university. The MULS has been a part of the massive expansion and development of academic and infrastructure facilities of the university. The MULS presently has a five branches with a combined collection of 55,170 volumes, located on the Okija and Elele campuses.

The branches of MULS include:

- The main library with a total collection of 31,000 monographs, 464 periodical titles (2,300 volumes). It has a seating capacity of 250 readers and a floor space of 324 square meters.
- The Law Library has a total of 8,000 law books, 2,000 non-law books, and 1,600 volumes of 90 periodical titles. The seating capacity is 104 readers and the floor area is 132 square meters.
- The Medical Library holds about 6,120 medical texts and 865 volumes of 46 journal titles. The library has a seating capacity of 56 readers and a floor space of 176.27 square meters.
- The Library and Information Science Department Library has 850 monographs, 80 journals, 23 reading spaces, and a floor area of 88.135 square meters.

In addition to those branches on the main campus at Okija, the campus library at Elele has a collection of 7,200 books, 500 volumes of 64 titles of medical journals and 1,250 volumes of 23 titles of non-medical journals. The library accommodates about 96 readers in a useable floor area of 321.10 square meters.

Literature Review

Cronin (1981) says that research on library and information users improves understanding of the processes of information transfer. While the library provides services to diverse user-groups, Akinwunmi (1986) insists that "the services so provided should correspond, as closely as possible, to the needs of the users." Landau (1969) states that the reasons for user studies include: testing the usefulness of existing information resources and increasing the use of older works.

Beginning in the 1960s and even earlier, there has been an increasing volume of literature on user studies, information needs, and information seeking behaviour, which is a testimony to the importance of this topic. The literature is full of studies on the information needs of faculty. Mote (1962)

looks at the reasons for differences in information needs among scientists, while Odeinde (1975) examines scientific and technical information needs and services available to Nigeria-based researchers. Kochen (1977) investigates the information needs of health planners while Jam (1991/1992) looks at academic staff in selected non-university institutions in Nigeria. (Other important studies include Urquhart and Crane (1994); Tadesse and Neelameghan (1995); Popoola (1996); Bruce (1998); Huotari and Wilson (2001); Tibar (2002); Baker (2004); Bruce (2005); Macevieiute (2006); Sen and Tailor (2007); Bigdeli (2007).

Many scholars have examined the information needs of faculty members in Nigeria and elsewhere. For instance, the findings of Singh (1981), Ajidahun (1990), Ehikhamenor (1990) and Jam (1991/1992), establish that the information needs of faculty are job-related, specifically to teaching, research, and publication. This has been repeatedly emphasized in recent surveys. See, for example, Njongmeta and Ehikhamenor (1998); Odusanya and Amusa (2003); Baker (2004); Bruce (2005); Macevieiute (2006, and Bigdeli (2007. Akusu (1987), finds that information needs vary according to area of specialization. The job-related nature of faculty information needs was explored in studies such as those by Holland and Powel (1995), Scheiber, Schneemann, and Wischer (1998), Otike (1999), and Guillaume and Bath (2004).

Jam (1991/1992) finds that periodicals and journals are the predominant information materials used by academic staff in a survey of selected tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The extensive use of periodicals by faculty derives from the ability of these publications to provide current and up-to-date information. Others who have explored this include Osiobe (1986); Woodward (1990); Olanlokun and Momoh (1994) and Szilvassey (1996). Bozimo (1983) focusea on the library and information needs of university-based academics and posita that most lecturers in Nigerian universities have unmet information needs for their teaching and research activities. This contrasts sharply with Baker (2004), who paints a general picture of increasing availability of information for professional and vocational undertakings. Baker elicits optimism that the information gap is being addressed; however, Whittaker (1997) and Popoola (2001) caution that availability of information resources and services does not automatically translate to information accessibility and use.

Awokoya (1988) and Adimorah (1993) describe the constraints on effective information delivery to academic staff in technological and tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Such constraints include inadequate information centres, inadequate library staff, lack of relevant information materials, inconvenient hours, and absence of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Isah (1995) and Edem and Bassey (1999), in separate studies, recommend increased library funding, departmentalization of library services, and provision of current information resources to ameliorate difficulties associated with information search and retrieval in Nigerian university libraries.

Methodology

The survey took place between June 2005 and March 2006. The major research instrument was a ten-item, dual-section questionnaire designed to elicit data on the background of respondents, information needs, information search patterns, information sources, impediments to easy access to information, and recommendations on ways of making information readily accessible to academics in a typical Nigerian university environment.

Sixty copies of the questionnaire were administered to a random sample of respondents at the two campuses of Madonna University. Some copies of the questionnaire were administered in one of the library branches. Others, particularly senior academics occupying high administrative positions, had the questionnaire administered to them in their offices. Most respondents complied with the request for immediate completion and return of the research instrument. This accounts for the high return rate. In all, 56 respondents (93.3%) completed and returned copies of the questionnaire in usable form.

Research Findings

Table 1: Academic Status of Respondents

Academic Status	No. Respondents	Percentage
Professor	3	5.3%
Reader/Assoc. Professor	5	9%
Senior Lecturer	8	14.2%
Lecturer I	12	21.5%
Lecturer II	13	23.2%
Assistant Lecturer	10	17.9%
Graduate Assistant	5	9%
Total	56	100%

Table 2: Information Needs of Faculty Members

Specific Information Needs	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Teaching and research materials	17	30.3%
Materials for community service	10	17.9%
Materials on current affairs	4	7.1
Health/social welfare information	12	21.4%
Info. on governmental/political issues	3	5.3%
Info. on business and economic affairs	10	17.9%
Total	56	100%

Table 3: Sources of Information for Faculty Members

Sources	No. of Respondent	Percentage
Library materials	30	53.6%
The print media	13	23.2%
Electronic media	10	17.9%
Discussion with colleagues	3	5.3%
Total	56	100%

Table 4: Publications Consulted by Faculty Members

Publications	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Monographs/textbooks	13	23.2%
Journals/periodicals	17	30.3%
Reference materials	8	14.2%
Newspaper/magazines	11	19.7%
Govt. Publications	5	9%
Dissertations/theses	2	3.6%
Total	56	100%

Journals/periodicals and monographs/textbooks are the major publications needed and consulted by faculty members. Some of the non-book information sources consulted by faculty members who took part in the study were analyzed. The summary of the findings show that 16 respondents (28.6%) sourced needed information from the Internet and other online databases. Computers were useful to 13 respondents (23.2%); Also, 11 respondents (19.7%) found television relevant to their information needs while the radio was a major source of information for 10 respondents (17.9%). Four respondents (7.1%) indicated that their major source of non-book information was the telephone and two (3.6%) found realia or objects relevant to their information needs.

Table 5: Problems Encountered in Information Search

Problems	No. of Respondents	%
Inadequacy of current and relevant information in the library.	17	30.3%
Lack of information technologies.	14	25%
Incompetent staff	12	21.4%
Economic/financial constraints	2	3.6%
Shortage of reading spaces in the library	10	17.9%
Unaware of where to locate needed information mat.	1	1.8%
Total	56	100%

The major impediment to information access is the lack of current and relevant sources. Respondents were allowed to make recommendations to improve access. The largest single segment (21.4%) suggested acquisition of relevant and current publications. Other suggestions included conducting user studies, creating separate reading sections for faculty, providing information and communication technologies (ICTs), departmental libraries, the participation of academic staff in book selection, and displays and awareness programmes to notify users of available information sources.

Discussion

Table 1 shows that few senior lecturers, readers, and professors participated in the study, while many respondents were at the rank of lecturer 1 and below. This contrasts with a similar study by Jam (1991/1992) in which many senior academics took part. This can be explained by the different interests of junior and senior staff. Most of the senior ranking academics who participated in the present study are retirees from public tertiary institutions who have already reached their career peak and who therefore lack the motivation to conduct research. Moreover, most of these senior academics occupy management and administrative positions, which may not give them time for research. Many of the junior lecturers, on

the other hand, are relatively new to their fields, and therefore need to do research for promotion and career advancement. These younger lecturers need information and make extensive use of the library.

As shown in Table 2, most of the faculty members needed information for their teaching and research responsibilities. This tallies with earlier research by Singh (1981), Ehikhamenor (1990) and Ajidahun (1990), who reported that lecturers in Nigeria seek information that is directly relevant to their jobs. Few respondents required information on governmental or political issues, which is surprising, considering that Nigerian university lecturers both individually and through their industrial union (the Academic Staff Union of Universities - ASUU), have generally shown keen interest in government policies and have participated actively in various political processes.

Library materials supplied more than 50% of information needs of respondents (Table 3). This corroborates earlier findings by Bozimo (1983) and Goldberg (1991) that the library is the major source of information for academic staff. A negligible number of respondents reported getting information from their colleagues. This is a departure from Wood (1971), Elman (1971), and Urquhart and Crane (1994) who reported that scientist, technologists, and health professionals make extensive use of oral and allied information sources.

The preference of academic staff for journals (Table 4) is not surprising. Journals contain latest the research findings, and faculty use them to keep track of developments in their disciplines. Government documents and research reports are less used, perhaps because Madonna University is a relatively new institution, and its library system that does have depository status and may not have developed a good way to acquire government publications.

More than 50% of respondents make use of ICT, especially computers and the Internet, which shows the steady growth of information infrastructure in Nigeria. Though many respondents got their information from the library (Table 3), a majority of them encountered problems arising from outdated and irrelevant materials (Table 5). Since many respondents identified "lack of information technology" as an impediment to access (Table 5), it can be deduced that those respondents who got information from computers and the Internet made independent arrangements to use that technology.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Certain conclusions can be drawn from a careful analysis of the findings of this study. There is no significant difference between the information needs of lecturers in Nigerian private universities and that of their colleagues in public universities. Monographs and journals are the main information sources used by faculty members in Nigeria and elsewhere. These publications should be readily available; however, it is clear that there are problems with this ready access. The following recommendations are intended to improve the present situation:

- Better access to scholarly journals is essential for faculty to keep current in their disciplines. Current monographs should also be acquired to augment journal holdings.
- MULS needs a detailed acquisitions and collection development policy. This policy should make provision for input from faculty members
- Periodic user education programmes are needed, for faculty members in particular, to improve their library skills and make it easier for them to navigate the library.
- Research grants should be made available to faculty members. These professionals need economic empowerment to purchase texts for teaching and research.
- The MULS should acquire reference books and other materials that serve general information needs.
- Departmental libraries should be created to ease congestion in the main or central library. Separate sections could be reserved in these libraries for the exclusive use of faculty members.

- Private university libraries should provide more current awareness services (CAS) targeted at supplying the information needs of faculty members.
- More ICTs should be incorporated into the information delivery system of private universities in Nigeria. This will expedite information delivery in these institutions.

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