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The Effect of Library Policies on Overdue Materials in University Libraries in the South-South Zone, Nigeria

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Introduction

The library is the symbolic heart or nerve center of academic life in any university. Rubin (1998) observes that colleges are waking up to the fact that the work of every professor and every department depends on the library, because it is the place where students can learn to move beyond lectures and textbooks and investigate for themselves. Changes in teaching methods require the academic library to supplement the single text book and enrichment the curriculum. Fargo (1998) notes that the library has an even more vital relationship to the academic community than before, and that books and other resources do not merely accompany academic activities, but are the fabric of those activities.

Libraries create policies to ensure that library resources are used effectively. Policies are mechanisms for ensuring that individuals are treated fairly and equitably and that individuals' interests are managed for the greater good (Bryson 1999). Policies are guides to decision making. They ensure that organizational decisions are in line organizational philosophy (Clark 1999). Nwalo (2002) observes that policies are common in all industrial and service organizations. For consistency of service, high

productivity, and efficiency, organizations provide guidelines to be followed by those involved in the service or production process.

Professional librarians exercise independent judgment in the course of providing library service. This implies that a librarians adhere policies, but may also deviate from policies when professional judgment indicates that they should. Service to library patrons cannot be overemphasized (Akinbode 2002). Readers' services, which includes lending materials, is a major service that attracts many people to the library. Users of academic libraries are free to borrow materials for home use. The level, extent, and number depend on the library's policies. Loan periods are also a matter of policy. Some users do not return materials when they are due. The research reported on here was being carried to determine the extent of overdue material and the policy factors that contribute to it.

Problem Statement

Circulation of materials is one of the most basic library services. Circulation policies stipulate who is eligible to borrow books and how many books may be borrowed at a time and for what duration. Academic libraries usually permit extensive borrowing. Undergraduates may be allowed to borrow up to four books for four weeks, while graduate students and members of the academic staff are usually allowed up to six books for two months (Edoka 2000). The problem of overdue material is common in academic libraries. Available circulation records in the university libraries under study reveal the incidence of overdues. Little is known about the details of this phenomenon or the influence of library policies on material being overdue. Questions that need answers include:

- Do library policies influence the incidence of overdue material in university libraries?
- What policies influence book overdues in Nigerian university libraries?

Literature Review

Montuiloff (1990) observes that libraries should formulate policies to ensure effective and efficient use of their information resources. Hill (1994) states that there is no single, all-encompassing policy; instead, policy tends to address specific issues, including overlapping and contradictory ones. A policy is a statement of the means for realizing the goals of an organization. Library policy statements are the regulations, principles, and strategies that help realize the needs of libraries. Since policies are guides to decision-making, they ensure that decisions of the organization or institution are kept in line with their philosophies (Clarke, 1999).

A library policy is a document that guides the management of the library from the present to the future (NCCE 2000). Wilson (1995) reflects that this development of formal policy ensured the success of the distance learning library strategy at the University of Calgary. Similarly, Rodriguez (1996) makes the point that for a library to

offer resources and services appropriate to the academic level and scope of an institution's programmes, policies and procedures must be planned and followed.

Weaver & Shaffer (1995) stress the need for written policies governing standards of service, particularly where agreements between institutions exist. Such policy documents should also include a mission statement and an account of the goals and objective of the service. Lebowitz (1997) suggests that following an extensive needs assessment, where aims and objectives are identified, libraries should plan for the six crucial elements of a service policy namely, staffing, programme format, services, document delivery, use of technology, and publicity/public relations. Lebowitz adds that if the planning stage is correctly completed, implementation can be relatively easy. It is worth noting that planning service for library patrons must be seen as an activity, which goes with the development of internal services and procedures.

Ogbodo (2002) suggests a need for library policies and procedure on the behavior of library patrons. Reactions to situations such as theft or mutilation of materials, or disruptive behavior, should not be left to an individual staff member's judgment. According to Rubin (1998), policies and practices that are established and implemented by libraries regarding the creation, organization, use, and dissemination of knowledge are themselves information policies, which have tremendous impact on patrons' access to information. He outlines library policies under the following headings: organization of material and collections, selection and collection development policies, service policies, preservation, and intellectual freedom.

Methodology

The study uses a survey that covered three university libraries located in the South South zone of Nigeria:

- University of Uyo
- University of Calabar
- University of Port Harcourt

The population for the study consists of all registered library users in the three universities. A questionnaire known as Library Book Loan Practices and Book Overdue (LBLPBO) was used as the primary instrument. There were 1,000 respondents to the survey.

Analysis and Findings

The data collected from the questionnaire was analysed using percentages, while the hypothesis was tested using a t-test.

The discussion of findings was guided by responses from the questionnaire as shown below:

Table 1. Questionnaire results

Items	SA		A		D		SD	
	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F
1. Opening hours of the library affects overdues	152	15.2	418	41.8	213	21.3	217	21.7
2. Library policy on special materials affects overdues	282	28.2	362	36.2	214	21.4	142	14.2
3. Penalty for defaulters should be very strict	165	16.5	401	40.1	310	31.0	124	12.4
4. Penalty should be revised every two years	314	31.4	380	38.0	210	21.0	96	9.6
5. Policy on Penalty affects overdues	400	40.0	314	31.4	218	21.8	68	6.8
6. No. of books allowed on loan should be increased	318	31.8	252	25.2	280	28.0	150	15.0
7. Loan duration affects overdues	358	35.8	265	26.5	182	18.2	195	19.5
8. The library environment is conducive to reading	315	31.5	304	30.4	152	15.2	229	22.9
9. The library should open on Sundays	415	41.5	286	28.6	210	21.0	89	8.9
10. Opening hours should be extended	318	31.8	286	28.6	188	18.8	208	20.8
11. There are multiple copies of available books	29.6	29.6	385	38.5	200	20.0	119	11.9
12. Library opens sufficient hours during the week	382	38.2	295	29.5	105	10.5	218	21.8
13. Library opens sufficient hours during the weekend	302	30.2	282	28.2	205	20.5	291	29.1

Ho: 1. Library policies have no significant influence on book overdue.

Tables 2 and 3. Paired differences

	Mean	N	Std Deviation	Std Error Mean
Pair VAR 00001 1	634.3846	13	54.1657	15.0229
VAR 00002	371.7692	13	64.0158	17.7548

	Paired Differences					
	Mean	Std Deviation	Std Error Mean	95% Confidence interval of the Difference		
				Lower	Upper	t
Pair VAR 00001-VAR 00002	262.6154	116.4972	32.3105	192.2169	333.0139	28

Item numbers 1-3 on the questionnaire, on library policies and overdues, were coded and used for the analysis. The analysis yielded a standard deviation of 46.38 and a mean score of 553.33 with a t-test of 3.98. This result shows that library policies have significant influence on book overdues. About 64% of the respondents agreed to this fact. This answers research question 1 that sought to examine whether library policies influence book overdue. Items 1-13 were also treated using a t-test. The result of the analysis yielded a t-test value of 8.2 that was highly significant at 0.05 probability level. $t = 8.12$; $df = 12$; $p < 0.05$. The critical value obtained was 2.18. The null hypothesis of no significant influence of library policies on book overdue is hereby rejected and it is restated that library policies have significant influence on book overdues.

Library Policies and Overdue Materials

This study has revealed that library policies are one of the factors that influence book overdues, which is congruent with the findings of Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) that loan or circulation policies may cause inaccessibility of library materials. A closer look at the itemized statements on policies and overdues shows that 57% of respondents strongly agree that opening hours of the library affect book overdues. This supports Edoka's (2000) opinion that convenient hours are a crucial factor in making library services available. Slightly more than 60% of respondents agree that library hours should be extended. More than 67% agree that the library opens sufficient hours during the week, and nearly 60% agree that the library opens sufficient hours during the weekend. A little over 70% agree that the library should open on Sundays. The length of time that libraries are open determines whether library materials may or may not be used, and thus indirectly determines the degree of physical accessibility to materials. It therefore follows that a user may not return library materials on time because the hours of the library are not convenient. The libraries in the study area open from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, and 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Saturday. None of the three libraries open on Sundays, because it is difficult to find staffing on Sunday, and the anticipated use is not seen as great enough to justify it. According to Aguolu and Aguolu (2002), these typical library hours are unsatisfactory, because libraries are heavily used evenings and weekends by students. It is thus wrong to assume that library users will have no need of the university library on Sundays. Reference and circulation should be open to users during all the hours the library is open. This would eliminate physical and administrative barriers to library use. In the libraries in the population, only Reader's Services' Division (circulation) opens on Saturdays.

The use of special materials such as reference materials, reserve collections, government documents, Africana, etc., is restricted. Nearly 65% agree that the number of books allowed to circulate should be increased. University of Uyo and university of Port Harcourt libraries allow undergraduate students to borrow two books for two weeks, postgraduate students borrow four books for four weeks, lecturers borrow five books for one month, and postgraduate students five books for one month. This supports Opara's (2001) observation that in institution of higher learning, the loan period, and the number of books vary between staff and students. On whether the libraries have multiple copies of available texts 67.1% agree. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002), Nwalo (2000), and Oti (2000) all agree that loan periods and other circulation policies should vary by borrower status. When questioned as to whether policies on the penalty for defaulters affects overdues, 71.4% agree. Close to 60% of the respondents agree that borrowed books are kept beyond the date due because fines are minimal. This contradicts Udoh's (2004) assertion that when a fine is too much, it will serve as a further deterrent from returning library books. A nearly equal number agree that the penalty for defaulting should be very strict, and approximately 70% agree that the penalty should be revised every two years. Udoh (2004) states that there may be a relationship between books, material losses, and loan policies, especially for books in heavy demand. It is often cheaper and easier for a reader to fail to return books than to pay fines.

Six hundred and nineteen (61.9%) of respondents agree that their library's environment is conducive to reading. Onwubiko and Onu (2002) assert that the library has three fundamental components that encompass all other activities: the great Bs, the Building, Books, and Brain. There should be adequate accommodation and space in the library for all anticipated activities. The building should be properly designed to be roomy, well-ventilated, and adequately lighted. This is supported by Madu (2004) that library buildings and the environment must be conducive for learning. When the library environment is not comfortable, users may be reluctant to go there to return library materials when they are due. This supports that library policies influence book overdues, as indicated by the majority of the respondents in this study and as shown by Ogbodo (2004).

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