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Covid-19 Effects on Libraries Goes Beyond Books: Lead City University in Perspective

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Abstract

Information is a resource that is naturally needed in all aspects of human endeavors and the library, as an institution responsible for the acquisition, organization and dissemination of information is highly sought by information users. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closure or restriction of access to libraries all over the world, of which the Lead City University Library was not an exception. This article contends that the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has a wide ranging impact on the library and its users that goes beyond lack of access to books and other information resources. This is because the library is a social institution which has become more of a community center where people can come together not only to access information but also to learn new skills and make new connections in their quest for enlightenment, leisure, up skilling, learning, re-learning and self-fulfillment. To ameliorate this situation and maintain the relevance of the library, the study recommended that it

is important that academic libraries invest more on Information Technology infrastructures and electronic resources. Librarians also need to acquire improved ICT skills needed for virtual interaction with information users which is sacrosanct in this era of the new normal.

Keywords: Covid- 19, Libraries, Users, Information Needs, Information Seeking Behavior, Academic Library

Introduction

In early 2020, a viral disease later named COVID-19 was reported from Wuhan, the capital and major business city of Hubei province, China (Ohia, Bakarey and Ahmad, 2020). In a very short time, the disease had spread beyond the Chinese mainland and cases were reported in several countries with an exponential increase in morbidity and mortality rates. The disease has evolved and continues to be a very serious emergency across the globe. By the end of the first quarter of the year 2020, more than 100,000 people in 100 countries across four continents have been infected with the virus which prompted the WHO to declare COVID-19 a pandemic (Callaway, 2020).

Worldwide, government authorities have implemented public safety measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus in their respective countries. According to Falt and Das (2020), these nationwide closures have affected 90 per cent of the world's student population. Localised closures in other countries have affected millions of additional learners.

Towards the end of March, 2020, the Nigerian government put in place several measures to prevent, mitigate, and respond to the spread of COVID-19 across the country. These include lockdowns, movement restrictions, social and physical distancing measures, as well as public health measures. The lockdowns included closure of all offices and businesses, except for medical facilities and businesses dealing with essential products and services such as food,

transportation, medicine and medical supplies. In Nigeria, as in many other countries globally, academic institutions were shut, students were dispersed to their various homes to comply with the total lockdown implemented by the government.

The closure of universities also means the closure of their academic libraries. In the case of Lead City University Ibadan, which was approved for immediate take off by the Board of National University Commission in 2003; presently with about five thousand undergraduate students across the five faculties of the institution as well as the thousands of post graduate students no longer have access to the print resources and other library facilities of the university library.

Lead City University runs a library system made up of the Central Library and faculty libraries. The faculties include, Law, Science, Social Science and Education libraries respectively. All the faculty libraries report to the University librarian at the Central Library. Pre COVID 19, Lead City University Library system operates between the hours of 9am to 4:30pm during which services such as; reference and information services, user education, user advisory services, digital library services etc., are rendered. Users which include lecturers, researchers, non-teaching staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students, make use of the library resources such as print and electronic information materials daily (Peris and Otike, 2016). They also make use of available facilities such as computer systems, internet and photocopiers (students are charged for photocopies). There is a provision for library users with personal laptops and other devices to come to the library and access online/offline digital resources. For those who do not have these devices, the library has two sections where they can make use of computer systems for various purposes (Parande, Tapare, Borle, 2017)

Aside from using the available resources and services, library users also enjoy the professional assistance of librarians in information retrieval, information literacy and dissemination of useful

information. This implies that library users are always assured of quality services when they visit the libraries. Users are also able to use the library for recreational purposes and other sundry reasons such as charging of devices or simply meeting with friends. In all, the Central library and the various faculty libraries are always a beehive of activities before the advent of the COVID 19 pandemic.

With the COVID-19 outbreak and the resultant closure of libraries, measures were taken to contain the spread of the pandemic. Institutes are racing to shift their courses online; students are engaging en masse with e-books and e-learning; and researchers are drawing chiefly on electronic journals. These measures, which have affected the functioning of higher education worldwide, did not spare Lead City University library. As its parent institution shifted to online classes. Being a proactive institution that has user centism as its focal tenet, the management of the Lead City University Library quickly responded and modified operations, services and procedures by moving to providing library services virtually. Consequently, there is a transition to remote library services on an unprecedented scale. The library had to find a way of meeting the information needs of the library users within a very short time. This involves answering users' queries through, e-mails, SMS and other improvised methods (Quacquarelli, 2020).

The library also took advantage of publishers who have risen to the occasion by offering free content and curating personalised collections so that people can continue to read and learn without disruption. Indeed, as the demand for credible e-resources surges, digital libraries have emerged as vital pathways to high-quality e-books, journals and educational content (Falt and Das, 2020). However, while the inability to access the library print resources can be offset by the provision of digital library services, the impact of the restrictions put in place as a result of

COVID 19 has far reaching effects on the Lead City University Library, the staff and its users. This paper examines some of those effects.

Literature Review

Libraries Are More than Books

The closing of libraries has meant that library users are denied access to library books but this is not the only thing library users will miss. According to Ashworth (2020), libraries provide a sense of community where users can meet with like-minded people and can meet up and explore shared interests. What is more, if an individual desires a quiet time or simply to be alone, the library is also there for them. Although, the author was referring to public libraries, this also applies to academic libraries such as Lead City University Library. Lecturers, researchers, Undergraduate and Postgraduate students used the library daily for varied reasons which stems most especially for teaching, learning and research. Students meet up with friends to solve class assignments, search for study materials or simply catch up (Rasul and Singh, 2017). This sense of community is no longer available when libraries are under lock and keys. Many students are encouraged to study when they see their colleagues doing the same. Now that students are in their individual homes, the impetus to study may be reduced due to lack of motivation that can be derived from places such as academic libraries.

This is not good news for the library too as the library users who have turned to online resources may not be easily attracted back to the library after the pandemic is over and libraries are reopened.

Reduced Information and Reference Services

The definition of library is not complete without mentioning the inputs of professional librarians who must be in place to facilitate the effective use of the available library resources. The sum total of those activities, especially the services that directly interact with library users are grouped under Information and reference services. Oyelede (2004) asserted that academic libraries provide such services to both staff and students with the aim of supporting the learning process such as students course works, assigned reading, term papers and projects as well as providing materials in general support of research and advanced study for academic staff and postgraduate students. Lead City University Library assists the library users in their own personal development through such services as selective dissemination of information, user advisory, mentoring programmes and others.

The implication of this is that library users are rarely left to their own devices when they use the library. However, with the lockdown occasioned by the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic which implies that the only mode of access is remote access, these services are highly affected. Although, many studies have highlighted the role of digital reference services in assisting library users as they interact with online resources (Coughenour, 2017), Nigerian realities has shown that academic libraries in Nigeria are not thriving when it comes to the provision of online reference services (Madukoma, 2015; Uzoigwe and Eze, 2018).

Lead City University Library is also affected by this challenge as a lot of factors are serving as hindrances to its ability to provide effective online services as is also the case in other Nigerian academic libraries (Musangi, 2015).

Pronounced Impact of Digital Divide

One of the effects of the pandemic is to further highlight the digital divide that exists between libraries in developed and developing countries on one hand and those between the haves and have-nots on the other side. As mentioned earlier, some libraries are more ready than others to render remote services. Similarly, some library users are more equipped than others to benefit from remote library services (Jægera and Blaabæka, 2020). The study by Jægera and Blaabæka, (2020) showed that poor parents in Denmark borrowed far less digital learning materials from libraries than well to do parents. What this implies is that disadvantaged users who relied on library facilities to access electronic resources pre-COVID-19 may be at a great disadvantage when it comes to accessing knowledge during the pandemic. Similarly, there are some clients of the Lead City University Library who relied on the library facilities such as computer systems, electricity, Wi-Fi etc. in order to satisfy their information needs. This set of library users may become underserved in the remote access era because of non-availability of these facilities.

Inevitable Paradigm Change for Libraries and Librarians

As noted by Okike (2020), the academic library can no longer continue to lavish huge portions of their budgets and attention on books and other print resources. The current environment has emphasized the greater role to be played by digital resources. Libraries with robust digital capabilities are likely to thrive in this pandemic while libraries with heavy reliance on print resources and no digital infrastructure are certain to be in limbo and may even struggle post COVID 19. The implication for Lead City University is a review of its collection development policy to reflect the new normal where electronic resources are given more priority.

The skill requirement for librarians, more than ever before, is very clear. Today, librarians are expected to manage digital libraries, organize digital knowledge and information and disseminate

digital information to users who are no longer able to physically visit the library. Pal (2013) notes that today's librarians must also acquire new psychological, praxeological, social and professional capabilities. Reports from more developed countries show that; though most libraries (98%) in the US have closed their buildings to the public, staff has quickly adapted their services by creating new virtual programs, expanding digital services and working with local government agencies. Over 70% of respondents are using social media to share COVID-19 information and more than 60% are using social media to promote census participation (Crowe, 2020).

In this era of information explosion where thousands of bits of information are chunked out on a daily basis, librarians are expected to collect, organize, store and disseminate the information for consumption of the users. In the current global pandemic, there are new ways to deliver information both real and fake; it is left for librarians to sort out the real information for their users to avoid misinformation. It is expected that librarians work independently to deliver service-oriented, researcher-centered applications, instructional programmes, projects and services (Okike, 2020).

Tait et al. (2016) noted that the tools and resources required to supply the needed information and transform it into knowledge have changed, but the librarian's role has remained unchanged. Especially now, it seems necessary to reflect and redefine the characteristics of a modern librarian that would best serve all users. Librarians may be indispensable in the era of the information dissemination because they play a distinctive and dynamic role in providing easy access to authoritative information at the right time and disseminating to the user in appropriate formats based on local user needs. But this can only be possible if they possess or are ready to acquire the necessary skill and perspective needed to operate in a dominantly digital

environment. Okike and Adetoro (2019) confirmed in their study that it is pertinent that librarians re-tool and up-skill themselves in information and communication technology to ensure As Lead City University shifts to online learning, the library is expected to provide support to all categories of library users in terms of digital resources needed for teaching, learning as well as infuse the concept of the new normal which requires library administrators and library staff to rethink or re-engineer what they are doing now to provide the best possible resources and services to users Hasan (2020). The paradigm should be shifted on revamping services, rethinking collection development and management, reorganizing departments and units, redeployment/retraining of staff, and the list goes on.

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guaranteeing quality education and a safe environment for our children from pre-primary school to tertiary level.

This new normal is seeing teachers redesign and readapt the curriculum with an emphasis placed on relevant individualised learning.

Methodology

Qualitative research approach was adopted for data gathering and analysis in order to get in depth responses from the respondents. The instrument that was applicable in this study was an interview schedule which was administered on selected member of staff of Lead City University Library who was knowledgeable about the activities and services during the Covid-19 pandemic respectively. The responses were analysed descriptively. Each clue from the research question relating to the study was taken one by one and analysed based on the respondents.

Results

Though some libraries practice departmentalization, the uniqueness about Lead City University Library, they provide a holistic librarian in the sense that the main vocal use of the university library is to meet the information needs of the users and to promote research has this is supported by Katuli-Munyoro & Mutula, 2018.

It was gathered and verified by the principal librarian, librarian one (s), system analyst... that before the locked down, Lead City University Library rendered information services such as, reference and information services, user education, user advisory services, digital library services, information literacy services among others Peris and Otike, (2016).

Hence, according to respondent 1, who is the head of the library, he was affirmative that there were services rendered during the covid-19 locked down. This was supported by respondent 2 which consist of principal librarian, librarian in charge of reader services/ reader sections

(managements), librarian in charge of faculty of sciences library, library officer in charge of science collections all attest that information services were rendered to users during covid-19 lock down. However, it was reported that there were no activities at the faculty libraries during that period as reported by the respondents from the faculty of law. Also, the serial and cataloguing section of the library was also not functioning during the covid-19 due the physical locked down.

Furthermore, from the reader services sections, it was gathered that services such as research assistance, reference services, document delivery service, access to on-line databases, indexing and abstracting services was rendered during the locked down as this is supported by the view of Oyelede (2004). Additionally, services were limited to the central library during this period.

Findings

The findings show the physical closure of the institution amid COVID – 19 did not stop most of the librarians from performing their duties and responsibilities as librarians. Though, routine services such as cataloguing and classifying of materials were suspended, printed serials publications were unused, the gray literatures were inaccessible; nevertheless, reference services among others were being done virtually.

It is also obvious that most librarians at Lead City University provided services such as; reference services, information literacy services, sorting (data mining), collating of relevant research resources for researchers etc were provided via whatsapp, sms, e-mails, telegram and other electronic means.

Summary

The adjustments needed to cope with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused structural changes in academic libraries which require a strategic approach to tackle. The closure

of libraries has caused reduction in information services which has been made even worse by lack of required infrastructures for online library services as well as lack of necessary ICT skills on the part of the librarians. However, the pandemic has also caused a paradigm shift which has forced librarians and library management to accept the fact that it can no longer be business as usual and start thinking of innovative ways to provide library services.

Conclusion

It is difficult to envisage an institution that can claim to be immune from the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. For academic libraries, the effects go beyond the inability of library users to have access to library books or other facilities. This is because libraries are more than just books. Libraries are educational as well as service institutions which cater for the psychological and cognitive well being of their patrons. As a result, the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has a wide ranging impact on the library and its users who are left alone to satisfy their information needs from any available source and who may find it difficult to access professional help when they encounter any challenges in the information search and retrieval process.

It is also obvious that library service must shift from predominantly manual mode of operation to digital, ICT-driven services because the new normal may not allow for large gathering as common in the libraries in a lot of years to come.

Recommendations

The negative impacts of the COVID-19 on libraries are significant. However, the academic library can lessen these effects by stepping up on the provision of online services. To achieve this, librarians must have a radical reorientation towards the provision of library services in the

digital environment. There is a need for a new outlook, which is required to deal with users who may not behave online as they would behave when they are physically in the library.

It is important that academic libraries invest more on Information Technology infrastructures and electronic resources. This is highly useful for the present as well as when the pandemic is over because library users are becoming more used to accessing information online. Librarians should improve on their skills, ready to learn, unlearn and relearn to fit seamlessly into the normal. This implies that, librarians should change their attitudes and orientation towards the adoption of new technology and innovations. They need to learn and relearn new ICT skills, and the way information resources are acquired, processed and delivered to the end users.

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