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Challenges and Prospects of Reference Services in Federal University Libraries in South-West, Nigeria

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Abstract

The importance of the reference section in any library cannot be overemphasised because it reflects the functionality of the library. Global trends in technology have opened doors of opportunity for the reference section to serve its users better through the use of online assistive technologies, expert systems, and other artificial intelligence techniques. To this end, this study focused on the challenges and prospects of reference services in Federal Academic Libraries in the Southwest of Nigeria. Using the descriptive survey design, questionnaire was administered through google forms for data collection on Reference section staff from the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, Osun State and University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos. The result revealed that face-to-face consultation was the most used medium for reference service delivery while chatbots and web referencing are not used in these libraries; an indication that libraries in Nigeria are far behind in harnessing abounding opportunities for improved reference services. The study recommended that libraries should look toward adopting innovative technologies to enhance the provision of reference services in their libraries.

Keywords: Social media, Innovative technologies, Academic libraries, Reference services, University Libraries

Introduction

Reference services are important services in the library that add to the overall image or functionality of the library. The reference section of the library holds and cares for valuable information resources that cannot be loaned to users such encyclopedias, biographies, gazetteers, dictionaries, maps, almanacs, periodicals, newspapers and journals among others (Zemengue, 2021). Apart from provision of resources, the section provides one- on- one services to users to meet their ever-dynamic information needs. These services, referred to as reference services, are germane in assisting the library users to effectively use the information resources. Reference services are generally information-seeking services and guidance actively provided by a librarian in charge of the reference section to library patrons in search of information. Reader education, satisfying users' requests for specialized information and assistance, and managing the use of library reference materials and equipment are all examples of reference services provided to their users.

In reference services, users interact with the reference librarian to solve their personal, research, academic, and even social information needs. As noted by Zemengue (2021) the reference librarians are responsible for assisting the users in researching relevant topics as well as selecting recreational reading items. In other words, they provide reference services in the manner of assisting misinformed users who are unfamiliar with appropriate library search techniques. These allow people to appreciate reading, improve their reading habits, and consider libraries, particularly academic libraries, as vital in meeting their reference queries. The traditional method of service delivery in the reference section is the face to face method but with the breakthrough of Information Communication Technology (ICT), service provision in libraries was taken to another level.

Generally, the introduction of (ICT) brought about a significant upgrade in the world where a lot of things changed and the traditional method stepped back from the world of technology. As ICT became the trend, institutions and organizations from across the world began to appropriate its technologies in the activities and services they render, and this did not leave out libraries services. Gradually, the traditional way of service delivery in the library began to give way to a digital way with resources and services of the library made available and accessible to users who do not have to leave their comfort zones in order to use the library (Nwosu & Obiano, 2021). With the development of electronic, virtual and digital library, the actual reference desk has been replaced by a digital reference desk where users can submit their queries online and acquire the information they require at any time and from any location (Younus & Nadeem, 2021).

Furthermore, users do not need to come into the library again as they can consult the reference librarian by telephone, email, and other means to get their reference queries answered. Then, the advent of social media and the application of artificial intelligence tools have made it much easier to provide reference services. Because these tools support live chat with either a human librarian or a chatbot, and even queries can be attended to at hours that are not human working hours. The reference service is an essential component of any library, and artificial intelligence techniques will strengthen the reference librarian. Libraries outside the shores of Africa have adopted intelligent systems to direct library users to sources of information within or outside the library system that are likely to answer their reference questions, which saves time for any library user and effectively and efficiently satisfies their information needs (Ajakaye, 2021).

This technology trend in reference services has provided a platform for real-time communal dialogue between academic librarians and library patrons. Consequently, because of the prevalent nature of these technologies, globalised services via expert systems ensure active engagement, collective involvement, and two-way communication with all parties engaged with no time or space limits (Bakare, 2018). As a result, encouraging the integration of various technological applications to meet the reference queries of library patrons within the emerging web is based on the concept of the new standard in service delivery and has significantly changed the method of reference service delivery in global academic libraries (Zulu, Chewe, Chitumbo, & Musonda, 2020). Thus, rather than being bound to the four walls of the physical space of the library, reference services are becoming more decentralised and flexible while meeting their users' information needs.

With specific reference to Nigeria, reference services in academic libraries have evolved over the past 60 years in Nigeria, and there is still a call to catch up with global trends to implement the global best practices in the dissemination of reference services. Reference services start with face-to-face consultation by the user with the reference librarian. The reference librarian, in turn, has to look into their library collection to answer these users' queries. Much later, the reference librarian could refer library patrons to other resources where they could get the needed information to solve their queries. Nowadays, reference librarians can sit behind their desk and pull resources from the internet, other libraries, or even databases that they have subscriptions to answer the user's queries.

Statement of the Problem

Unfortunately, the application of technological tools is lagging behind in Nigeria, especially for the provision of reference services. Libraries still prefer the traditional face-to-face consultation to answer users' queries. Some of the public academic libraries do not have platforms online where they can interact with their users, like a social media page. Also, technological infrastructure to make the libraries interconnected is either not readily available or not in good shape because of a lack of funds. This, among others, has limited the effectiveness of reference services in public academic institutions to meet the academic and research needs of their users. To understand the prospect of reference services in Nigeria, the study seeks to look into how reference services have been delivered over the past 60 years and the challenges encountered so as to project the trends and future of reference service delivery in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine the current trends in reference service provision in academic libraries in South-west, Nigeria while the specific objectives are to:

- i. ascertain the methods used for the provision of reference services in academic libraries in South-west, Nigeria;
- ii. find out the methods adopted for the provision of reference services in academic libraries in South-west, Nigeria; and
- iii. identify the challenges confronting the methods used for the delivery of reference services in academic libraries in South-west, Nigeria.

Research Questions

These research questions guided the study:

1. What are the methods used for the provision of reference services in academic libraries in South-west, Nigeria?
2. What are the methods adopted for the provision of reference services in academic libraries in South-west, Nigeria?
3. What are the challenges confronting the methods used for the delivery of reference services in academic libraries in South-west, Nigeria?

Literature Review

Academic libraries serve an essential role in supporting academic institutions' instructional, learning, and research operations. They must effectively address the information needs of the academic community by improving their services and expanding their resources. The provision of an effective reference service aids in the better utilisation of resources. Speed, ease, and accessibility all have a significant impact on patrons' satisfaction. A reference librarian used to provide reference services at the reference desk within the library building during face-to-face meetings between the user and the librarian, over the phone, by fax, and through the mail. The reference librarian was primarily responsible for selecting appropriate and sufficient reference material, as well as organising and maintaining it so that users could use it readily and conveniently (Younus & Nadeem, 2021).

The advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT) has had a significant impact on reference sources as well as the provision of reference services. Web resources and databases have reinforced the print reference sources found in library reference sections. The way the reference service was provided has changed dramatically as a result of the advances of the Internet and the World Wide Web, as well as the introduction of interactive technologies. In addition to assisting users at the reference desk, the reference librarian now provides them with reference services in cyberspace by utilising Web technologies (Younus & Nadeem, 2021). It has been noted by researchers that the penetration of ICT into the library has resulted in a significant shift from the conventional library setup, which focuses on the physical collection of information resources. and physical provision of library services, to a point where knowledge is primarily stored in digital formats, as well as the methods by which users access information and libraries provide and manage resources and services (Dang, 2018).

Okoli, Ukwedeh, and Idah (2021) found that the traditional reference services do not suffice in today's information and communication technology era. To be effective in meeting the information needs and efficiently answering reference queries of their patrons, reference librarians must digitize their resources and provide digital reference services, and reference librarians must review their information and reference services processes to meet the dynamic needs of their patrons. As new technologies are introduced, academic libraries must restructure their reference services by incorporating innovative technologies in order to provide efficient reference services and meet the expectations of their users. The emergence of reference services has had a significant impact on all types of libraries. The physical reference desk has been replaced by a virtual reference desk. Users can now submit their queries online and receive the information they require at any time and from any location (Younus & Nadeem, 2021).

Bakare and Bakare (2021) asserted that library professionals are embracing technological advances to the point where roles are constantly being reformed, which has caused remodelling in the provision of reference services. This has been exacerbated by the era of the new normal, in which librarians are expected to bring their innovation and creativity to bear in the provision of hampered library services. Younus & Nadeem (2021) reported that in the 1990s, a number of public and academic libraries began to offer e-mail reference services. With the advent of the World Wide Web, libraries began to use web forms to accept users' reference requests. Therefore, library patrons can now send their reference queries and have a library reference personnel respond to them not in person or over the phone, but via electronic means (e-mail, chat, Web forms, etc.). The introduction of these technologies has enabled interaction and service delivery to occur regardless of geographical settings or time zones. (Ayanlola, 2017)

found that almost all libraries offer reference services by phone, and in many libraries, you can email your reference inquiry or ask a reference librarian, who will e-mail you back with the relevant suggestions.

Bakare and Bakare (2021) reported that university libraries in advanced countries are transitioning away from traditional labour-intensive systems of providing library services and toward some simple, dynamic, technologically driven systems to provide reference services to users. As a result, university libraries in advanced nations are more valuable than ever in providing enhanced library services to their patrons because they have implemented global emerging innovations in meeting their clientele's information needs through the use of sophisticated technologies (Omini & Osuolale, 2019). Academic libraries in developing countries find this difficult to achieve because of the numerous challenges that affect the delivery of adequate reference services in their academic libraries.

Nevertheless, adoption of emergent technology in reference service delivery is fraught with difficulties in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, where there is a scarcity of research on the perception of these technologies, acceptance, and implementation in academic libraries (Baro and Godfrey, 2015), which conforms to global trends in reference service delivery. Though Bakare (2018) discovered a high level of awareness of these technologies among librarians in South West Nigeria, this does not translate to extensive use in providing globalized reference services, creating a contrast. As a result, failure to follow global technological trends in reference service delivery will result in library patrons who are digital millennials and the vast majority of whom are internet savvy discontinuing their use.

Zemengue (2021) in his study discovered that reference services in libraries in Cameroon are lagging in their development. Challenges to their efficient organisation and functioning include insufficient financial resources and a shortage of qualified librarian staff; all these prevent the development of librarianship in the country. Ali (2020) opined that budget shortage is the first major challenge facing the implantation of reference services delivery in Nigerian libraries. Libraries are the hardest hit when the parent institution's budget is reduced, which affects every section of the library. Another issue is a lack of or insufficient skilled personnel. Managing the reference section without enough skilled personnel is a difficult task for librarians. To keep up with global trends, the library staff requires various types of training. Because technology is changing so quickly, staff training is an ongoing process. If the library staff is unfamiliar with the available technological tools, they may not be in the best position to assist

the users and answer their reference queries properly. It is a waste of money and space to not have enough skilled workers while having a standard reference section and tools.

Zemengue, (2021) stated that on a regular basis, users present reference queries—questions that require complex information that cannot be obtained from a single source. Libraries are expected to respond to these reference queries or questions posed by users. They are also expected to anticipate user queries in order to quickly provide the information resources required to answer such queries. Another challenge is the absence of qualified library personnel. It is commonly stated that the quality of reference service delivery is usually reflected in the quality of staff. Most librarians working in the reference services lack professional training and do not have access to refresher courses and retraining. Poor information and communication technologies do not facilitate inter-library cooperation at the national, regional, and international levels. Other difficulties reported by Zemengue (2002) include slow Internet connection and power outage, both of which complicate the operation of the reference services. Hence, the need to study the prospect and challenges of reference services in federal university libraries in South-west, Nigeria.

Methodology

Descriptive survey was used in the study as the research design, which involves the collection of data from a given population and collating the results of findings obtained, which could be used to form a general opinion about the whole population. Creswell (2014) supported this by stating that in a descriptive study, the researcher can describe the responses of the independent, mediating, and or dependent variables, as the case may be. The target population of this study comprises library personnel who work in the reference section of federal university libraries that have been established for at least 60 years, which include the University of Lagos; Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; and the University of Ibadan. Total enumeration was used in the study. A structured questionnaire was administered online through google forms for data collection from the respondents, and data SPSS package was used to analyse collected data.

Results

Sixteen library personnel from the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State (5), Oyo State, Obafemi Awolowo, Ile-Ife, Osun State (6) and University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos (5) libraries responded to the google form administered online through LRCN Telegram group, NLA Whatsapp group and personal contacts.

Demographic Information

Fig. 1: Population distribution

Fig. 2: Gender distribution

Fig. 3: Age distribution in years

Fig. 4: Work experience

Mode of reference service provision

Table 1: showing the medium used in Federal Universities for provision of reference services

Items	Very Highly Used	Highly Used	Lowly Used	Not Used	Mean	S.D.
Face to face	56.3%	37.5%	6.3%	-	3.50	.632
E-mail referencing	37.5%	37.5%	12.5%	12.5%	3.00	1.033
Web form	18.8%	43.8%	25.0%	12.5%	2.69	.946
Web chat/ instant messaging	6.3%	50.0%	31.3%	12.5%	2.50	.816
Chatbots	-	25.0%	37.5%	37.5%	1.87	.806
Web-cam referencing/video-conferencing	-	18.8%	37.5%	43.8%	1.75	.775
Postal referencing	-	12.5%	43.8%	43.8%	1.69	.704
Telephone consultation	43.8%	43.8%	12.5%	-	3.19	.981

Results from table 1 show that face-to-face ($x = 3.50$) consultation was the most commonly used medium for reference service delivery in Federal Universities in Nigeria. This is followed by telephone consultation ($x = 3.19$) and e-mail referencing. The table also revealed that postal referencing ($x = 1.69$), web-cam referencing/video-conferencing ($x = 1.75$) and chatbots ($x = 1.87$) were not used for reference service delivery in Nigerian Federal Universities. This finding is corroborated by Ayanlola (2017), who found out that almost all libraries provide reference services face-to-face consultation, via the telephone, and in many libraries, you can email your reference questions, or ask a reference librarian who will e-mail you back with the answers.

Trends in implementation of reference services provision medium

Fig. 5: Trends in Reference services medium

Figure 5 shows the trends in the medium for reference service delivery in Nigeria over the past 60 years. Federal University Libraries have relied heavily on face-to-face consultation. The adoption of email referencing and telephone referencing came as a result of the widespread use of the internet and mobile phones in the 90s and 2000s, respectively. The advent of social media has also made webchats possible. Unfortunately, academic libraries are lagging behind and failing to catch up with developed societies in the application of emerging technologies for reference services provision in their libraries. Most academic libraries do not have an active website for consultations that would allow the application of chatbots, among other technologies. This finding is consistent with findings in other literature. (Zemengue, 2021) results showed that reference services in libraries in Cameroon are lagging in their development. (Bakare & Bakare, 2021) reported that academic libraries in advanced nations are transitioning from traditional labour-intensive systems to some simple, dynamic, technologically driven systems to provide reference services to users.

Challenges of reference service provision

Table 2: showing the challenges in the provision of reference services

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	S.D.
Inadequate funding of the reference section	62.5%	37.5%	-	-	3.63	.500
Poor update on reference policies of the library	62.5%	31.3%	6.3%	-	3.56	.629
Epileptic power supply to sustain electronic referencing	87.5%	6.3%	6.3%	-	3.69	.873
Lack of management support	50.0%	18.8%	31.3%	-	3.19	.911
Personal knowledge as skill as a reference librarian	50.0%	12.5%	31.3%	6.3%	3.06	1.063
Obsolete equipment and infrastructure	56.3%	31.3%	12.5%	-	3.44	.727
Staff willingness to change or update knowledge	31.3%	37.5%	25.0%	6.3%	2.94	.929
Difficulty in coping with patron demands	31.3%	25.0%	37.5%	6.3%	2.81	.981
Staff commitment and cooperation	50.0%	12.5%	31.3%	6.3%	3.06	1.063
Poor internet access	56.3%	12.5%	31.3%	-	3.25	.931

Epileptic power supply (x = 3.69), inadequate funding of the reference section (x = 3.63), poor update on reference policies of the library (x = 3.56), obsolete equipment and infrastructure (x = 3.44), and poor internet access (x = 3.25) are the major challenges facing reference service provision in federal universities in Nigeria. These challenges are such that they would impede the development of the reference section of the library. Despite numerous prospects for the reference section, the environment in Nigeria makes it difficult for the library to meet up with its counterparts in developed countries. The finding is supported by Ali (2020), who opines that budget shortage is the first major challenge facing the implantation of reference services delivery in Nigerian libraries. Libraries are the worst hit whenever the parent organisation suffers a budget cut, which affects every section of the library. (Zemengue, 2021) also noted that challenges to the efficient organisation and functioning of the reference section include insufficient financial resources and a shortage of qualified librarian staff; all these prevent the development of librarianship in the country.

Conclusion

Academic libraries in Nigeria have tried their best to meet global trends in the provision of library services for their users. Provision of library services are now much more than having an IT or ICT section in the library; it is the proper implementation of innovative technologies to meet the ever-dynamic information needs of its patrons at any geographical location or time of the day. Libraries must shift their focus away from face-to-face consultation, which has been heavily relied on for the past 60 years, and toward implementing a variety of opportunities for effective and efficient reference service delivery. Every society or institution is not without its own challenges. Academic libraries in Nigeria need to rise above their challenges and be the pacesetter in galvanising the prospect of the provision of reference services to their users for every other type of library to emulate.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended to improve digital reference services in academic libraries in Nigeria:

1. Academic libraries should look toward the implementation of other medium of reference service delivery which has not been implemented in their libraries;

2. Academic libraries should, like other organisations, build up their personal libraries' websites, create online platforms whereby users can interact with a human librarian or chatbots, and optimize their social media accounts;
3. Academic libraries should look toward adopting innovative technologies in artificial intelligence, such as expert systems and other assistive technologies, to complement an bn nactivities in the reference section;
4. Libraries need to invest heavily in alternative power supplies to power the library system at all times;
5. The library needs to figure out how to plan and follow global trends with its meagre budget. Also, the library should see how to raise funds from other organisations for the library;
6. There should be constant training and retraining of library personnel in the reference section to upskill and learn the new method of reference service delivery; and
7. Library policies must be updated regularly, which should properly capture all sections of the library, especially the reference section, which should conform to global trends as a guideline for activities in the reference section.

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The of humans form their enthusiasm to learn about the unknown, which makes Man seeks information that is durable enough to be retained as a permanent source of information to be passed down from one generation to the next. (Ali, 2020).

reference services that were not affiliated with a library, either electronically or physically, began to arise on the Internet. The emergence of reference services has had a significant impact on all types of libraries.