

The Challenges of Computerizing a University Library in Nigeria: the Case of Kashim Ibrahim Library, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

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Introduction

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria is one of Nigeria's first generation universities, opening its doors in 1962. Like other universities, its functions include teaching, research, and community service. Ifidon and Okoli (2002) note that universities now have additional functions:

- pursuit, promotion, and dissemination of knowledge;
- provision of intellectual leadership;
- manpower development;
- promotion of social and economic modernisation;
- promotion of intra- and inter-continental and international understanding.

From these functions, university libraries have derived their objectives to include:

- provision of materials for undergraduate instruction, term papers, and projects, as well as for supplementary reading;
- provision of materials in support of faculty, external and collaborative research;
- provision of expensive standard works, especially in the professional disciplines;

- provision of materials for personal development;
- provision of specialised information on the region within which the university is situated;
- cooperation with other academic libraries with a view to developing a network of academic library resources that are at the disposal of all scholars.

With these as the propelling force, the Kashim Ibrahim Library (KIL) of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, was built to be the epitome of excellence in university education in Nigeria. It is reputed to be the "biggest and the best university in all of Nigeria, if not Africa." Situated in the Northern part of Nigeria, it is indeed Nigeria's largest and the North's most prestigious university with a student population of approximately 35,000. The library is located in the main campus and there are satellite libraries on other campuses. Agboola (1996) describes the Ahmadu Bello University Library as the largest completed university library building in Sub-Saharan Africa, with an area of 1,582m and the capacity for 500,000 volumes and study space for 2,000. He states that, "its grandeur and size are not likely to be replicated in the Nigerian university library building scene for some time to come."

Kashim Ibrahim Library has a collection of about 1,200,000 volumes, comprising books, non-book materials, journals, etc. Under the headship of Professor Doris Bozimo, the University Librarian, the library has acquired a substantial quantity of electronic resources on CD-ROM. The library has made significant efforts to secure online access to journals and other electronic resources. Through the sponsorship of an international organisation, the library has provided access to EBSCO Databases, AGORA, AJOL, etc. However, in these days of information and communication technology and virtual libraries, library operations in Ahmadu Bello University are still largely manual. The basic library routines of acquisitions, information processing, storage and retrieval of information, and circulation are still manually performed. This is likely to remain so for a long time to come.

University library computerization in Nigeria has been in the pipeline since the 1970s, although concerted efforts began in the late 1990s. In 1970, Iya Abubakar delivered a lecture in a meeting of the Nigerian Library Association (NLA), the national association that is equivalent to the American Library Association (ALA). The theme of the lecture was the library and the computer. Abolaji (2000) states that significant and widespread efforts at

computerizing library services started in the 1990s. Major efforts at computerization were stalled by the supposed lack of funds and expertise.

The picture is different for research libraries. Ekpenyong (1997) notes that most notable research libraries in Nigeria are advanced in computerization. The International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA), Library, Ibadan, an agricultural research library, migrated to a fully computerized integrated library system in the 80s. The Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, Jos, the International Livestock Centre for Africa (ILCA), the Federal Institute for Industrial Research (FIIR), Oshodi, Lagos, the Nigerian Institute for International Affairs (NIIA), the British Council Library, the United States Information Service (USIS), and the Raw Materials Research and Development Council Library have implemented various degrees of automation in their library services. In fact, the Raw Materials Research and Development Council Library pioneered the development of an indigenous Windows-based library software, *X-Lib*.

In 1989, the World Bank provided funds to 30 federal universities in Nigeria for the acquisition of books, journals, and equipment (including computers), to encourage those universities to open their doors to information and communications technology. Unfortunately, no significant efforts were recorded in the of computerization of library services.

Kashim Ibrahim Library Complex

Kashim Ibrahim Library has a chain of libraries that are tributaries to the main library. These include the Medical library in the Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital, the School of Nursing Library also in the Teaching Hospital, the President Kennedy Library in the Institute of Administration, Kongo Campus, the Institute of Agriculture Library (IAR), the Veterinary Medical Library and several departmental libraries. These libraries serve a student population of about 35,000 and 2,600 academic and non-academic staff.

The collections of Kashim Ibrahim Library consists of books, journals, newspapers, rare books, theses and dissertations, Africana collections, government documents, documents of International organisations such as UNO, WHO, FAO, OAU, AU , etc. There is also a rich collection of audiovisual materials. These materials are organized and arranged in several sections including Reference, Media, Africana, Documents, Serials, and General Reading areas. They are classified using the Library of Congress Classification Scheme which is commonly used in university libraries.

Library Automation and Computerization

Universities libraries in Nigeria are realizing the need to move from their isolated past into integrated systems and networked operations. As Khalid (2000) observes, "[n]etworked and integrated functions draw on the experiences of the evolution of libraries in developed countries." Academic libraries in Nigeria are trying their best to catch up with their counterparts in the developed world. University library automation in Nigeria, which started in the late 1980s, are at various stages of automation of library services. The Federal Government of Nigeria through the National Universities Commission (NUC), which supervises all the universities and disburses funds to all the federal universities in Nigeria, introduced projects aimed at computerizing university services across the country. They initiated Management Information Systems (MIS) and started the Nigerian Universities Network (NUNET) project. NUNET was aimed at developing a viable local and wide area network in each institution. This was followed by the National Virtual (Digital) Library Project. The mission was "to provide, in an equitable and cost effective manner, enhanced access to national and international library and information resources and for sharing locally-available resources with libraries all over the world using digital technology." (UNESCO) The major objectives of the Virtual Library Project are:

- to improve the quality of teaching and research in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria through the provision of current books, journals and other library resources;
- to enhance access to academic libraries serving the education community in Nigeria to global library and information resources;
- to enhance scholarship, research, and lifelong learning through the establishment of permanent access to shared digital archival collections;
- to provide guidance for academic libraries on applying appropriate technologies used in the production of digital library resources; and
- to advance the use and usability of a globally-distributed network of library resources.

This project was designed to be carried out in five phases. The delivery of the Virtual Library was earmarked to be through the Internet, CD-ROM, and Wide Area Network (WAN). This laudable project has remained on paper for several years. Three years ago, the federal government came out with a

policy on library automation in academic libraries. The policy provided for university libraries to be linked with other renowned academic libraries across the globe to provide unlimited access to print and electronic materials. So far this has also remained on paper.

Initial efforts at automation of library services in Kashim Ibrahim Library of Ahmadu Bello University were made in the 1990s by the University Librarian at that time, Alhaji Inuwa Dikko. Although a committee was charged with automating the library and feasibility studies were carried out, no concerted efforts were directed at seeing automation become a reality. Reasons for delay were lack of funds and trained manpower. Eventually, however, a software package was chosen and acquired: ALICE, which is popular in the UK. It is a modular system, designed by database experts and professional librarians, and it conforms to international cataloguing standards. It has unique features for corporate and special libraries, for academic libraries, and for school libraries. It is affordable and scalable, and is usable on a standalone machine or over a wide area network.

A few staff of Kashim Ibrahim Library have been trained in using ALICE. They are currently entering all their catalogue data into the catalogue module. Electronic publications are gradually being introduced, audiovisual and multimedia reading rooms are provided, and CD-ROMs and the Internet services are offered. Several kinds of information can be found on the library homepages: information about the library, the catalogue, electronic resources, online information services, and related links. This will also make interlibrary loan service available online. Users can enter the library homepage, click the relevant button, fill in a form, and submit it. Digitization of resources would also allow the creation of electronic reading rooms, with computers to access the resources. Students can also do word processing or use Internet-related services on these computers.

Challenges of Computerization

Computerization, especially in the developing countries, is fraught with challenges. This is also the case with Kashim Ibrahim Library.

WAN/LAN

To a large extent, the existence of a University Wide Area Network (WAN) and a Local Area Network (LAN) within the library determines the success of computerization of library services. This is a major challenge to many universities in Nigeria. There is no reliable LAN in most universities.

Where this exists, it is achieved through surface cabling which exposes the cables to the effects of fire, storm, vandalization etc. In Kashim Ibrahim Library, although there is a LAN in the computer room where data entry is occurring, achieving a reliable LAN within the whole library is a Herculean task. The library building did not originally incorporate cabling for LAN. A LAN would have to be achieved through surface cabling with its attendant risks.

Computer Literacy/Education

Many of the staff of university libraries are not computer literate. This is a great setback in computerization. Many of the staff are reluctant to jettison their old mindset which resists change. Many are conservative and traditional, and suffer computer phobia. Research results show that, although the use of electronic information increases job satisfaction, confidence, and the effectiveness of librarians in their work, lack of technical expertise can be very frustrating to the librarians (Edward, et al, 1995). There is also a lack of technical support. Only one librarian is formally trained to initiate, develop, implement, and maintain computerized applications in the entire university library system. Those who had been trained gain only limited, or no access, to the packages in which they had been trained. Inquisitive users with IT skills cause serious dissatisfaction to the library staff (Bii and Wanyama, 2001).

Poor State of Power Generation

Regular power generation remains a problem in Nigeria. Frequent power outages constitute a serious bottleneck to automation. The cost of running generating plants is prohibitive.

Poor Maintenance and Update Culture

There is a poor maintenance culture in Nigeria. Universities, particularly the first generation like Ahmadu Bello University, have very poor maintenance. The size and complexity of the task have almost completely eroded maintenance at Ahmadu Bello University. This erosion is manifested in the frequent computer and network breakdowns and/or failures. To handle the growth of the library database and ensure fast data entry, retrieval, and inquiry through the OPAC, there is need for regular and consistent upgrade of computer facilities.

Getting Used to ALICE

The lack of IT skills and the slow process of automation mean that the library staff will take a very long time to become very familiar with the ALICE package. If the library staff find it difficult to get comfortable, the situation is worse for library users, who depend so much on the library staff for orientation and user instruction. Unfortunately, the library orientation programme and the entire user education package do not fully address IT skills.

Poor Funding of Library Services

Poor funding is a major challenge to libraries in Nigeria. Academic libraries in Nigeria derive their funds from the government. Although the federal budget provision has moved from 5% of the approved recurrent budget for library development to 10%, the budget of many academic libraries continues to dwindle. A high rate of inflation, low and unpredictable national income, the effects of global economic depression, and local currency devaluation continue to water down whatever budgetary provision is made for academic libraries in Nigeria. Many academic libraries in Nigeria have not initiated viable income-generating strategies to supplement government funding.

Education and Training

Most staff in academic libraries in Nigeria were trained in traditional librarianship. They are finding it difficult to cope with the requirements of the electronic age. Staff training and retraining have not been given a pride of place. Kashim Ibrahim Library has initiated computer literacy training for all staff, which has had a lukewarm reception. This attitude is a great deterrent to the computerization of library services.

These challenges have far-reaching effects on the implementation and sustenance of the automation of library services in Kashim Ibrahim Library of Ahmadu Bello University.

Recommendations

The need for staff training in computerized library applications cannot be overemphasized. The success of automation in the university library depends largely on the ability of staff to facilitate and implement the process. Proper, frequent, and regular in-house IT training is a necessity if the maximum benefit is to be gained from the automation of library services and, most importantly, if the operations of the automated systems are to be

independent of any one librarian. The need for organized training on all aspects of automation can be justified by the frequent minor system breakdowns or malfunctions that render the library systems inoperative unless the systems librarian is available.

Conclusion

Lack of funds and lack of information resources have been problems for academic libraries in Africa for many years. In addition, automation of information resources and services pose new problems. These include the acquisition, selection, and cataloguing of online information resources, the construction of databases, providing information literacy education for library users, and the new skills required by, and continuing education for, librarians. However, if the library ensures sound and quality automation of services and information resources, creates new approaches to user education, pays attention to the provision of continuing education for library staff, helping them to master the new techniques required for the management of electronic and the networked information resources and services, the gains of automation are immeasurable.

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