

Factors Affecting the Utilization of Products and Services in University Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

Universities are drivers in national development since effective and efficient dissemination of information is critical for integration in knowledge economy and national development. University libraries play an important role in facilitation of information access and dissemination in order for research, teaching and learning to take place. Indeed universities libraries hold the largest number of resources. In Kenya approximately 70% of all library resources are held by university libraries (Kenya Education Network, 2013). This article is a case study of Kenyan university libraries: utilization of products and services. Access to information in this information age revolves around the sharpened skilled competence of information professionals, adequacy of information communication technology infrastructure, Internet penetration and bandwidth and high level of information literacy of users, among others. The funding body also ought to give adequate funds to libraries.

Kenya has recently witnessed rapid expansion in university education from 7 public universities in 2012 to 22 public universities in 2013. The private universities have also expanded from 17 in 2011 to 25 in 2013. (Ng'ang'a, 2011; Wikipedia, 2013). The university core functions of research, teaching and learning are enhanced by access and use of library products and services by the faculty, students, administrators and other staff. The university library acquires, organizes and ensures retrievability of information resources such as books, theses, journals, government publications, encyclopedia, dictionaries, e-journals, e-books among others. A university library also renders reference, lending, current awareness, dissemination of information, photocopying, user education, online database searching services, among others.

The level of acquisition and organization of products, the level of services and the level access and usage differs from one university to the other due to various factors. However, availability of information resources and services does not translate automatically to accessibility and usage.

The expansion of University Education has also come in with for profit education providers who need to meet their students thirst for education with expeditious efficient library resources and services at low cost. This article will discuss major factors affecting the utilization of products and services in university libraries in Kenya. The issues discussed are lack of: adequate Internet connectivity, ICT infrastructure and computers, comprehensive user education and information marketing, and purpose build libraries. Recommendations that could be used by information professionals and other stake holders to advance utilization of products and services will be suggested.

BACKGROUND

University Libraries occupy a central position in supporting research and education. Universities are the greatest consumers of information. Kenyan university libraries hold approximately 70% of all library resources in the country (Kenya Education Network, (KENET) 2013). This huge investment should yield results in the achievement of quality university education for "the only rationale for a library and its budget is to support the work of the faculty and students." (Wegner & Zemsky, 2007). The University Library has to confront an environment where the needs of the faculty and students are greater than ever before due to increased population and diversity of programmes,

increased publication of print and digital resources, constrained budgets and new kinds of services. Hart and Kleinveldt (2011) survey of several world wide studies on researchers use of libraries report that researchers require the following from their libraries: access to up to date and generous collections of both print and electronic resources, access to archives and special collections – facilitated in recent years by libraries digitization projects, efficient ICTs, quick document delivery services; and specialist help and advice in tracing resources. The Library leadership and staff, therefore, must reposition themselves to serve users in a variety of media and information sources, provide information literacy and competency so that users are able to locate and evaluate the information they get to meet their needs, market the information services since the library operating in an information competitive environment.

CHALLENGES AFFECTING THE UTILIZATION OF PRODUCTS AND SERVICES IN LIBRARIES

For effective utilization of library products and services, it is critical for the following challenges to be addressed.

Need for Adequate Internet Connectivity, ICT Infrastructure, and Computers

University libraries subscribe to e-resources through the Kenya Library and Information Services Consortium (KLISC) which was formed in 2003 with the objective of collective subscription to e-resources. Usage of e-resources vary from one university to the next but generally they are underutilized (Amunga, 2011; Kavulya 2004) despite the heavy cost. This is due to lack of adequate Internet connection, ICT infrastructure and computers. Gudo, Olel and Oande (2011) stated that “public universities did not have satisfactory Internet provision for learners.... Computers and Internet services are integral ingredients to modern day education without which higher education suffers.” (KENET, 2006) goes further to aver that the number of networked computers is “fewer than 3 pcs per hundred students.” In contrast, in South Africa, the figure stands at 11 users to a computer while in United States

of America the ratio is 5 users to a computer (Gakio, 2006). In her study of African university libraries, (Rosenburg, 2005) averred that 85% of the libraries in the survey provide less than one computer for every 100 fulltime equivalent students. Due to lack of networked computers in libraries and the entire university, digital resources access and usage is hindered. Macharia and Nyakwende (2009) in their study on Internet adoption and diffusion in Kenyan universities recommended that “effective government support requires both necessary policies and laws to provide ICT facilities for students to access the Internet and supportive macro environment or culture that encourages Internet use as part of higher education”

Policies on ICT in Kenya as Harle (2006) rightly points out “have tended to overlook or ignore the specific needs of national higher education and research infrastructure.” Lack of adequate ICTs and Internet in libraries has limited not only the use of digital resources but also other web based services in the library, for example, reference services. This situation is further aggravated by major conspicuous disparities because most ICT facilities are in urban areas with the rural areas being the disadvantaged; university campuses in the rural areas experience the blunt of this disadvantage squarely. (Yegon, 2010). Low levels of electricity penetration with only 15% of the population having access to electricity and majority being in urban areas leads to this disadvantage in Internet accessibility (KPLC, 2007). Ochara, Belle and Brown (2008) further aver that “a snap shot of the state of Internet diffusion in Kenya reflects, on average good performance on the various dimensions of the Global Diffusion of Internet (GDI) framework. However this overall picture masks the reality that a majority of the population, mostly in the rural areas, lack access to basic amenities such as electricity and hence infrastructure to support Internet.” Nigeria like Kenya experiences “disparity in the level of accessibility to ICT between some universities as some enjoy maximum support from NGOs.” In the e-readiness 2013 survey, close to 52% of the students in the Group of 30 universities were dissatisfied with the Internet speeds at their campus networks and thought cyber cafes or mobile Internet speeds were better (Meoli Karshoda, KENET and Team Leader, e-readiness 2013 survey: e-mail communication March 10, 2014). This situation was reported in 50% of African university libraries whose Internet connectivity was reported poor (slow speeds infringing on the usefulness of the



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