

**CURRENT TRENDS IN THE PRACTICE OF ACADEMIC  
LIBRARIANSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF UNIVERSITY GOALS  
IN KENYA**

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The traditional view that takes pride in volumes of books and journal titles, held in a library has been the main approach to collection developing in Kenya. This situation is unsustainable because academic libraries have generally been underfunded and have not been able to cope with price increases, leave alone space limitations. The reasons can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Information explosion to many resources being published
- 2) Limited space
- 3) Price increases
- 4) The appreciation of the fact that no library can be self-sufficient (No library is an Island)
- 5) Electronic publishing implication
- 6) Inadequate funding

In principle librarians are starting to accept the view that it is not what you own but what your library can provide access to. This is known as “gateway concept.” This view sees the library as a link and entry point to resources and opportunities not only those in the local library but also in other libraries. The implications of gateway concept are wide ranging, for example:

Need for strong partnerships and collaborations in collection development. In this connection we would like to commend the efforts by Kenya Libraries and information services consortium, (KLISC). International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) and Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) and the Network of African Medical Librarians, all of which advocate for collaboration, improved research communication and increased access by all. For this to be effective the need for continuous staff and user training is necessary.

The second implication is the demand for librarians and libraries to add value to teaching, learning and research. This can be done by Integrating Information Literacy to problem solving activities being addressed university management, staff and students.

What we are advocating here is that there is a lot of value addition in adopting open access to accelerate research, enrich teaching and learning and even reduce the gap between information rich and information poor. In “open access” the librarians are able to show how effective they provide user access to service in partnership with other stakeholders who are managing universities, teaching, research and learning.

## **2.0 The Theory of Postmodernism**

According to Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, postmodernism is a reaction against philosophical assumptions and values of modern period. It is a departure from modernism and has a distrust of grand theories. As a result, it is characterized by broad skepticism and subjectivism. The two main roles in postmodernism are:

The “expert” and the “philosopher” both of whom have roles within library and information service. The expert is expected to know the breadth and the limitations to knowledge while the philosopher learns what is known and must be gained through questioning.

Why try to understand postmodernism? By seeking to understand these roles the academic librarian would be expected to become more comfortable and adept with the service especially reference process and in the creation of searching tools. The growing trend of postmodern thinking in the academia is leading to further research and rethinking of the traditional librarians’ tools. In that context, academic librarians should be looking into the most acceptable ways in which they can develop strategies and service to serve users better. They are expected to shift focus from system-centered to user-centered service. The prior conditions for such a service would be an understanding of actual and potential users themselves and how and where they decide to seek information.

Postmodernism reinforces the idea of constant change to increase the librarians’ knowledge of the people so as to improve the process of and access to

appropriate information. In addition, understanding the purpose for which the information will be utilized will help in the design of user services.

### **3.0 Academic Libraries in the Context Higher Education**

As we discuss here today, parents and students have started to question the value of university education. Some employers are dissatisfied and are questioning the quality of some degree programmes and even some universities. There is pressure from stakeholders for higher education to demonstrate value or return on education investment. This is likely to become the top issue facing universities and their libraries.

Further university education is entering a period of turmoil. The rise of online instructions, evening and weekend classes and even credit transfers from one university to another are issues which are assuming center stage among the stakeholders.

There is also the more complex issue of globalization of higher education. Academic institutions all over the globe are expanding their footprint in Kenya. A visit to the worldwide Blog on “The Chronicle of Higher Education Website” gives a clear perspective of what is happening.

All the above issues have implications for academic libraries. It is time they assumed a critical consideration by our libraries being the central organ of the universities. “Give me a library and I will build a university around it”.

### **4.0 The Gap Between Service Providers and Service Users.**

Traditionally, academic libraries had the view that “build it and they will come attitude.” This perspective marginalized the need to find out what the users’ needs were and relied on “I know what the users want.” The implications of that practice has been that service providers have been complaining that users are not using the resources as they should. However, to improve the services, modern academic libraries have taken a wide variety of strategies and have risen to the challenge by transforming their service through:

- Minimizing physical collection space
- Creating virtual reference service
- Automating circulation
- Developing user-driven collections by involving the faculty in the selection of information resources.
- Providing service orientation and instruction.
- Increasing opening hours.

Users of academic libraries, most of whom are students are expected in their courses to be able to analyse information and apply it to new contexts, reflect on what they know, identify what they still need to learn and sort out through contradictory arguments. They are not only expected to learn but also to create new knowledge. To do this they are expected to find and evaluate the quality of information they find, and integrate information into knowledge from different sources. Many users have been dissatisfied with the support they get from academic librarians. In a research carried out in 2012 by The Educause Center for Applied Research in the U.S., students were asked

“When it comes to your success as an undergraduate, what is the one website of resource you could not live without?”

The majority cited Google and Blackboard while only five per cent cited library website. Students are saying that:

- 1) They are unable to determine/evaluate quality of information.
- 2) Don't know how to find research articles and other resources.
- 3) Don't know how to avoid copying and not aware of the many ethical and legal issues surrounding use of resources.
- 4) Don't know how to integrate information to knowledge from different sources.

Academic librarians need to give these issues serious consideration and redesign their services to help solve the problems.

Employers, on their part are less than satisfied with the information seeking behaviour of graduates as they all go to online resources. They do not triangulate the different ways of acquiring information. They are in a lot of hurry to provide answers most of which are acquired online and of low quality.

## 5.0 The Challenge of Embracing Transformation by Academic Libraries

“Perhaps it is an overstatement to say that academic libraries are drifting in a vast sea of information and technology advancement, searching for an appropriate course of action. Nevertheless, we appear to have lost the stabilizing rudder of confidence in who we are and what we are to do. As a more powerful alternative to the images of librarianship already available or proposed, I suggest we begin to think of libraries as centers for **conversation** and of ourselves as **mediators** of and participants in the conversation of the world. (Bechtel 1986).

Capturing journal articles and books is not good enough. The library services need to be fully integrated in the scholarly life of faculty and students research, teaching and learning. The faculty carry out research, prepare to teach and publish papers. At that time, the faculty are highly motivated and desperate for help. Equally, the students carry out research and do academic assignments. In that process they are frustrated and desperate. These are premium opportunities for the librarians to partner with the researchers, lecturers, teachers and students. They are opportunities for the libraries to add value to the users’ problem-solving exercise. But you know what happens, the librarians wait for the faculty member to ask for a citation and then offer to teach them the many aspects of information literacy. That is the time the user is trying to beat a deadline. They will not listen. Jessamyn quoted by Lankes, (2011) suggested:

One of the things I learned in library school is that when people have an information need, they will always ask people they know before a librarian. The trick is making sure the librarians are some of the people they know.

I suggest that academic librarians should stop managing the resources used for research, teaching and learning and start improving the research, teaching and learning. That will propel them to the heart of the university “if you facilitate the process essential to the functioning of the academy, you become essential” (Lanke, 2011:105). Users may be aware that they have a knowledge gap but they have no idea of what they want. Helping them to figure out that is a service that academic libraries should provide.

## **6.0 News Roles for Academic Libraries.**

**6.1 Academic libraries will be pressured to prove value they provide to the academic institutions.** This means that they will be expected to give more compelling reasons to continue being supported or ever to exist. Assessment for higher education institutions is adopting outcome-based approach. Libraries will be expected to articulate their contribution to university effectiveness. What is the correlation between use of library services and student or faculty success? In other words, academic libraries should start focusing on outcomes rather than outputs. The volumes in circulation may not mean much unless we show their impact.

**6.2 Technology will continue to drive much of activities in academic libraries.** People's desire for information may increase but the tools of access may change to social media and mobile environments. A lot of library users own smartphones today, the ipods, ipads and other tablets. This is likely to continue. Online and hybrid learning is increasingly being adopted. New publishing paradigms such as open content will challenge the librarians as a curator and the need for curative training. An issue like digital media literacy will drive the need for further training for academic libraries.

## **6.3 User Behaviour and Expectations**

Convenience, time saving and system friendliness are likely to affect aspects of user information seeking. Selection of sources by accessibility and use will be very critical. Libraries are not the first port of call for users. Some of the reasons given have been that libraries have been "hard to use," "last resort," "inconvenient" and "not time saving." In my own study, I found out that provision of what "users need," is less important than service personnel users interaction service quality. Among the five most critical issues that influence users to decide to use or avoid using the library were:

- Service personnel – user interaction service quality.
- Overall service satisfaction
- User needs satisfaction
- Users competencies to use service
- Overall past experience

With widespread use of the internet and search engines, users have no problem finding sources, the challenge is to provide “immediate, seamless access to sources and information in order to remain relevant.

Bringing the library service and the librarian to the library user in a manner that the user will judge it to be qualitative should be at the forefront of service delivery. This demands value and addition. The way the librarian could add value is through embedding qualitative service, user satisfaction, positive user experience and information literacy, all that to learning, teaching and research is critical.

#### **6.4 Promotion of Data Curation.**

Open access to data gathered through research is likely to grow. Academic libraries will play an important role in description, management, storage, access and reuse of data. The challenge is in the development of standards as all types of data continue to evolve and cloud-based repositories emerge.

In academic libraries there is a need for professionals with skills in data-curation, data-mining and analysis. This is one area in which university libraries can help their mother institutions.

#### **6.5 The Learning Commons**

Nick Bilton (2010, 266) in his book, “I live in the future and here is how it works: why your world, work and brain are being creatively disrupted, it’s time to reorganize, rethink and get back to the business of storytelling” concludes that storytelling is the key to success, highlighting that users are searching for an experience rather than a physical good.

The new vision perceives a library as a place referred to as the “learning commons.” Learning commons capitalize on the need for social learning space providing the traditional learning atmosphere of studying, learning and customer service. The key is to hold the library as a house of learning and knowledge to offer the capacity for users to interact with people and materials in technological and social ways.

## CONCLUSION

Academic librarianship in Kenya has been slow in connecting to their communities, for example in changing and picking new roles to help users solve their everyday problems. They have not been competitive enough on emerging issues, problems and jurisdictions relating to their communities. Value-addition has been elusive. This refers to the users' experience that creates personal enrichment, excitement and passion among users. Strong collaboration programmes in learning, teaching and research are required for academic libraries to add value. Academic libraries should find ways and means of integrating their service to community problem-solving activities. Integrating library service to teaching and learning such that the library becomes a "learning common" equated to a "desired experience" will move the library from playing a supportive role to a partnership. That is where you should be.

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