



Evaluation of Reference Services in Academic Libraries: a Comparative Analysis of Three Universities in Nigeria

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Research Article

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Article history:

Received 4 January 2015

Accepted 1 April 2015

Available online 28 May 2015

Journal of Balkan Libraries Union

Vol. 3, No.1, pp. 24-29, 2015.

Digital Object Identifier: 10.16918/bluj.68108

ABSTRACT

The major purpose of this study was to evaluate reference services in academic libraries in Nigeria. In carry out this study, 4 research questions were posed. The population of the study consisted of 100 students. (60 students from University of Agriculture, Makurdi, 60 students from Benue State University and 40 students from the University of Mkar). One set of data collection instrument Evaluation of Reference Services in Academic Libraries Questionnaire (ERSAQ) was used. The major findings of the study revealed that reference services provided in the libraries include answering reference queries, provision of referral services and provision digital reference services. Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are presented: provision of adequate reference materials, regular re-training of reference librarians and provision of current awareness services for the library users.

Keywords: Reference services, Current awareness services, Digital reference services, Makurdi and Mkar.

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I. Introduction

Libraries exist in order to provide their clientele with information resources. These materials are made accessible through cataloguing and indexing services provided by the libraries through the public service section. Among the public service functions of a library the greater part of it is performed by the reference section. The term reference service according to Udensi and Akor (2014) is a direct personal assistance to readers seeking for information in the library. Consequently, reference services in Nigeria libraries is an age long tradition as reference librarians serve as pilot toward directing information seekers on the latest information that are inherent in a particular field of human endeavour, the provision of qualitative reference service will no doubt promote research and development for national development.

However, reference service can be attributed to selective dissemination of information (SDI) as well as current awareness services (CAS), this is to say that a reference librarian should be able to provide some selected information that are relevant to the researcher and also create an enabling environment whereby the

researcher or the investigator or the information seeker can get current information that will help him/her solve a particular problem.

Subsequently, reference services are accorded great importance in libraries worldwide. It entails assisting library users to find the required library resources. A references service is referred to as one of the most professional aspects of the librarian's responsibilities which every prospective librarian must properly grasp. It is also defined as a personal assistance provided to users in the pursuit of information. Olalokun (2001), posited that it is a major characteristic of reference service in Nigerian libraries to be part of a whole library organization, except where the specific function of the organization concerned is mainly referral. Reference departments serve as the link between the library and its immediate clientele be they public, community or groups of specialist users. The main aim is to provide a wide range of services and facilities, which will enhance exploitative use of the literature through the concepts of assistance and self-direction. A library can be regarded as a collection of books and other forms of recorded knowledge, purposefully selected and systematically organized and preserved by qualified library personnel for use by either the public or a target group. As a repository

of man's knowledge of the universe, the library is the most dependable source of information on any subject whatsoever. Nwalo (2000) opined that the modern reference librarian does not merely acquire published documents or books but also documents original information emanating from its locality such original documentation covers socio-cultural issues which ordinarily might not have been the subject of books for a long time to come.

The libraries help to disseminate information that is recorded, and that may be in form of written document, printed materials and digitized materials. They appear in different formats such as books, periodicals, newspapers, diaries, letters, manuscripts, tapes, diskettes, compact disks, databases, artifacts, microforms, etc. Thus, any activity that is concerned with the handling of information, such as searching, retrieval communication, dissemination, preservation, management and evaluation is librarianship. Anyone that has need of information no matter the subject, the first port of call should be the reference department of the library. This department has the human and materials resources to provide answers to any information need expressed by the user, while it can provide some information immediately; it could lead the inquirer to the discovery of more detailed information through a variety of tools and techniques that are available in the resources or information centres/libraries. Performance evaluation is the process of judging the competence with which a member of staff has performed the duties and responsibilities associated with the position for which the person was hired by an organization or Information centre.

Retiz (2004) alleged that reference services are all the functions performed by a trained librarian employed in the reference section of a library to meet the information needs of the patrons (in person, by telephone, or electronically), including but not limited to answering substantive questions, instructing users in the selection and use of appropriate tools and techniques for finding information, conducting searches on behalf of the patron, directing users to the location of library resources, assisting in the evaluation of information, referring patrons to resources outside the library when appropriate, keeping reference statistics and participating in the developing of the reference collection. Evaluation of services in any library is done in order to find out whether or not they are meeting the desired goals and to what extent.

II. Objectives of the Study

The major purpose of this study is to critically evaluate reference services in Federal University of Agriculture, Makurdi, Benue State University, Makurdi and the University of Mkar, Nigeria. Specifically the study is designed to determine the following:

1. To find out the available reference services in the libraries
2. The extent to which reference services are provided in the libraries suit the users
3. The level of adequacy of the reference services provided in the libraries.

4. The users' Perceptions on reference queries in the libraries under study.

III. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. Which of the reference services are available in the libraries under study?
2. To what extent do the reference services provided in the libraries suit the users?
3. What is the level of adequacy of the reference services provided in the libraries under study?
4. What are the users' perception on reference queries in the libraries under study?

IV. Literature Review

Many author and scholars wrote so much on reference services. In the view of Udensi and Akor (2014) and Reih (2000) reference service has a dual meaning. Reference service refers to a variety of activities associated with personal assistance to library users including selection, liaison activities, bibliographic instruction and the implementation of electronic products. It also indicates direct librarian user interaction which takes place in some physical service points, typically the reference desk. Edoa (2000) in his own opinion states that reference services are the personal assistance given by librarian to an individual in search of information for whatever purpose as well as various library activities deliberately designed to facilitate easy availability of information.

According to Schement (2002) reference librarians are variously referred to as 'mediators between the user and the information', and 'navigators of information superhighway' The role of the reference librarian has changed greatly over the last two decades with the emergence of information technology and the huge impact in the librarianship and information provision. The role has grown from that of a collector and preserver of information resources to a professional involved in very complex issues of organization, the dissemination of and access to information.

Traditionally, the librarian's function was to assist in the collection development and acquisition, cataloguing and classification, circulation, provision of reference services, and preservation, conservation and archiving. As the library evolves into the digital library, reference librarians have been considering how to adjust reference services to the new environment and new information needs. According to some statistics; for instance, users' enquiries at the reference desk are declining Palmer (1999), Chowdhury (2002), Lankes (2000), and Lipow (1999). Today the reference librarian's responsibilities have increased by societal expectations for information access through enhanced electronic capabilities. Reference librarians are the key to the continued success of libraries. Several researchers have discussed the new role of librarians in the digital age. This is evident on the assertion of Raghavan (2000), Burke (2003), and Tedd (2003). From their views highlighted, it is no doubt that the digital revolution has brought changes and affected the librarian and other information professional. This set-

up is also changing the roles of the reference librarian into teaching, consultancy and researching besides providing access to information. The reference librarian must guide users in information gathering, information skills and tools, organizing information resources, search strategies, basic reference works, etc.

According to Bopp and Smith (2001), historians of reference service usually trace modern concepts of reference work to Samuel Green's 1876 paper, 'Personal relations between librarians and readers', later published in *American Library Journal* (now *Library Journal*). While it is doubtful that Green actually invented the idea of reference service for library users, he was the first to speak publicly about the concept and was the first to discuss it in writing. In both his speech to the first meeting of the American Library Association and his article, Green discussed the need for librarians actively to assist members of their communities in using library resources. While the term 'reference' did not evolve until several decades later Rothstein (1953), the publication of Green's article helped to popularize the new concept of reference service. In his article Green (1876) introduced four main functions of the reference librarian which remain as the basic tenets of reference service today:

1. Instructs patrons how to use the library
2. Answers patron queries
3. Aids the patron in selecting resources
4. Promotes the library within the community.

His article noted with delight that although catalogues and indexes are valuable, most users require instruction in their use. User also must be guided in selecting the books that best meet their information needs. Green also highlighted the importance of human interaction in the personal assistance process where librarians must be 'easy to get at and pleasant to talk with' (i.e., approachable), and librarians must mingle freely with users and help them in every way. Many changes have taken place since the publication of that first article. Rothstein (1955) detailed the growth and development of reference service from the earliest times until the mid-twentieth century. Consequently, technological innovation has played a key role in reference librarianship in the second half of the twentieth century. During the 1960s, libraries began to explore new technologies such as microfilm and microfiche, tapes and sound recordings. According to Grohs, Reed and Allan, (2003), the 1970s, brought full-text databases such as LEXIS and WESTLAW in the field of law. The 1980s brought about significant changes with the emergence of electronic card catalogs in many academic, public, and special libraries. Eventually the electronic catalogue databases became the online public access catalogues (OPACs) providing local as well as remote access. Another major change in the process of storage, retrieval and dissemination of information was brought by the invention of CD-ROMs. By the late 1990s, many libraries moved from CD-ROM to providing databases through the Internet.

Gross, McClure & Lankes (2001) asserted that academic libraries were the first to provide digital reference services in the early 1980s. One of the first services to go online was the Electronic Access to Reference Services (EARS) launched by the University of

Maryland Health Services Library in Baltimore in 1984, Wasik (2004) quoted from Weise and Bergendale (1986). Since that time, the number of academic and public libraries offering e-mail reference service continues to grow making e-mail the most common vehicle for providing digital reference services. However, experience has shown that there are several limitations inherent in trying to provide service this way. According to Bopp and Smith (2001), the major drawback of accepting reference queries by e-mail or Web page is the asynchronous nature of the interaction: library staff cannot interview the user in real time. As Abels (1996) has pointed out when e-mail is used to communicate, an interchange of questions and answers to clarify the question can result in substantial delays in providing the answer. However, users' perception on references has continued to grow rapidly as libraries have continued to improve especially in the provision of current awareness services (CAS) as well as selective dissemination information (SDI) to the right user, at the right time and in the right format.

According to Reitz (2004), competencies are the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to effectively handle professional responsibilities, usually within a specialization, expressed inclusive rather than as a set of minimum standards. ICT has changed the ways and patterns in which information and other services are dispensed. Nwachukwu (2004) supported this phenomenon when he observed that with all the changes in information and the processes of access, storage, transmission, and reproduction, and librarians and libraries must adapt to new roles and skills to cope with change. However, reference librarians must acquire relevant skills and competence in the application of the skills to the use of ICT in providing reference services to users. Shibanda (2001) holds that the information managers, especially academic librarians, must build on the positive aspects of information era while alleviating the negative aspects of globalization. Supporting that vision, Edekor (2004) contends that the effective management of new technologies depends largely on the availability of skilled employees and the society's level of literacy. For librarians to move forward in relevance and for libraries to provide services to demanding users, they must acquire relevant skill and competence in the use of ICT. Garuba (2007), support this view when he holds that the changing role requires that librarians learn new ways of performing their duties. He adds that computer literacy is of paramount importance to library professionals not only in Nigeria but other developing countries.

Ademodi and Adepoju (2009) contend that a policy should be put in place by National Universities Commission mandating all universities to automate their libraries within a specific period of time. This policy will have a significant impact on librarians' acquisition of computer skills and competencies.

V. Research Methods

Survey research design used to carry out this study to evaluate reference services in academic libraries in Nigeria. The population of the study consisted of 200

students (100 students from University of Agriculture, Makurdi, 60 students from Benue State University, Makurdi and 40 students from the university of Mkar) The instrument used for data collection was the questionnaire. The instrument was face validated before use by presenting it to three senior colleagues in the field of Library and Information Science. These experts were requested to examine the clarity of expression used as well as the appropriateness of language. The researcher administered and collected the questionnaire from the respondents. Thus there was a 60% rate of returns of the copies of questionnaire distributed. The date for the study was presented in tables and analyzed using simple percentages.

VI. Findings, Analysis and Discussion

Out of 200 copies of questionnaire that were administered to the library users, 120 (60%) were retrieved. The data from the retrieved questionnaire are hereby presented using simple statistics like frequency table and percentages.

Research Question 1: Which of the reference services are available in the library?

TABLE I
REFERENCE SERVICES PROVIDED

Reference Services	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Answering reference queries</i>	112	93.3
<i>Digital reference services</i>	34	28.3
<i>Referral services</i>	108	90

Table 1 reveals that the highest response rate of 112 (93.3%) revealed that answering reference queries are done in the reference section. This is followed by 108 (90%) response rate which indicates the referral services are being provided. Provision of digital reference services is low with a response rate of 34 (28.3%). The response revealed that the reference service being mostly provided are the answering of reference queries and provision of referral services.

Research Question 2: To what extent do the reference services provided in the libraries.

TABLE II
EXTENT OF REFERENCE SERVICE PROVISION TO USERS

Reference Services	Very good	Good	Not so good	Bad	Very bad
<i>Answering reference queries</i>	84 (40.4%)	33 (14.6%)	3 (2.6%)	-	-
<i>Provision of reference materials</i>	47 (22.6%)	56 (24.8%)	11 (9.4%)	6 (27.3%)	-
<i>Provision of theses/dissertations</i>	23 (11.1%)	51 (22.6%)	38 (32.5%)	7 (31.8%)	1 (14.3%)
<i>Provision of photocopying of reference materials</i>	41 (19.7%)	59 (25.8%)	-	-	-
<i>Providing referral services</i>	13 (6.3%)	27 (11.9%)	65 (55.6%)	9 (40.9%)	6 (85.7%)
<i>Total</i>	208 (100%)	226(100%)	117(100%)	22(100%)	7 (100%)

The extents of reference services provided to users are revealed in Table 6. Answering of reference queries is very good with a response rate of 84 (40.4%), while that of provision of reference materials are good with response rate of 56 (24.8%). 51 (22.6%) response rates indicated that the provision of theses/dissertations are good. Provision of photocopying of reference materials is good with response rate of 59 (25.8%). While that of providing

referral services are not so good with response rate 65 (55.6%). The result showed that provision of reference services is good. The provisions of referral services are not so good.

Research Question 3: What is the level of adequacy of the reference services provided in the libraries under study?

TABLE III
ADEQUACY OF REFERENCE SOURCES

Reference Sources	Very Adequate	Adequate	Inadequate	Very Inadequate
<i>Encyclopedia</i>	9 (7.0%)	88 (17.3%)	12 (4.3%)	-
<i>Dictionaries</i>	34 (26.6%)	67 (13.2%)	-	-
<i>Manuals</i>	7 (5.5%)	56 (11.0%)	34 (12.1%)	-
<i>Maps</i>	-	71 (13.9%)	39 (13.9%)	-
<i>Calendars</i>	-	29 (5.7%)	76 (27.0%)	9 (9.2%)
<i>Biographies</i>	-	67 (13.2%)	19 (6.8%)	34 (34.7%)
<i>Bibliographies</i>	-	12 (2.4%)	34 (12.1%)	-
<i>Abstract and Indexes</i>	37 (28.9%)	59 (11.6%)	23 (8.2%)	1 (1.0%)
<i>Government documents</i>	14 (10.9%)	26 (5.1%)	32 (11.4%)	45 (45.9%)
<i>Theses/Dissertations</i>	27 (21.1%)	34 (6.7%)	12 (4.3%)	9 (9.2%)
<i>Total</i>	128 (100%)	509 (100%)	281 (100%)	98 (100%)

From the above, it can be observed that majority of the respondents indicated that the level of adequacy of reference sources are average with a response rate of 509 (100%). The response rate of those that indicated very adequate for the reference sources in the library is 128 (100%). Those that indicated inadequate and very inadequate are 281 (100%) and 98 (100%) respectively.

From the Table, it is seen that reference sources such as encyclopedia, dictionaries, maps, biographies, abstract and indexes, and theses/dissertations are adequate while calendars, bibliographies, and government documents are inadequate.

Research Question 4: What are the users' perceptions on reference queries in the libraries under study?

TABLE IV
USERS' PERCEPTIONS ON REFERENCE QUERIES IN THE LIBRARY

Perceptions on Reference Queries	SA	A	D	SD
<i>It helps the user to be directed to the location of reference materials</i>	67(25.9%)	43(19.5%)	5(6.3%)	-
<i>It aids users in information retrieval</i>	97(37.5%)	23(10.4%)	-	-
<i>It aids users in selecting the right information material</i>	19(7.3%)	77(34.8%)	24(30%)	-
<i>It provides the users the right information at the right time in the right format</i>	9(3.5%)	36(16.3%)	42(52.5%)	3(60%)
<i>It enhances their searches and satisfies their information needs</i>	67(25.9%)	42(19.0%)	9(11.2%)	2(40%)
<i>Total</i>	259(100%)	221(100%)	80(100%)	5(100%)

From the above, it is observed that majority of the respondents indicated that they strongly agree with a response rate of 259 (100%). This is followed by 221 (100%) response rate which indicated agreed. 80 (100%) and 5 (100%) response rate indicated disagreed and agreed respectively.

From the analysis, it is revealed that the majority of the respondents observed that reference queries helps the user to be directed to the location of reference materials, aids users in information retrieval, aids users in selecting the right information material, provides the users the right information at the right time in the right format, and enhances their searches and satisfies their information needs.

VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study established that reference services are provided in the libraries. The reference services provided include; answering reference queries, referral services are readily provided in the library, provision of photocopying of reference materials, provision of reference materials, provision of theses/dissertations materials and provision of digital reference services. The extent to which reference services are being provided to users are good. Users' perceptions on reference queries include that it helps the user to be directed to the location of reference materials, aids users in information retrieval, aids users in selecting the right information material, provides the users the right information at the right time in the right format, and enhances their searches and satisfies their information needs. Finally reference librarians are competent in discharging their duties and that most of them are highly competent.

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations have been presented:

- Relevant, current and adequate reference materials in the appropriate format should always be made available so that the students can have access to them which will help them meet their education and information needs at all times.
- Reference librarians should be continuously

trained in order to meet the ever changing needs of their users.

- Awareness, in the form of library instruction, should be done for the students so that they will be aware of the various reference services available to them.
- Current Awareness Services (CAS) and Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) should be introduced.

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