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NEED FOR SUBJECT LIBRARIANS IN POLYTECHNIC LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
Information can be found in different formats such as e-books, CD-ROM, online journals and other electronic databases, in addition to the traditional paper formats. The introduction of the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications supported e-resources project has opened up access to full-text e-journals, e-books, and other databases on the Web to the polytechnic libraries in Nigeria. This paper discusses the relevance of subject librarianship in polytechnic libraries in Nigeria especially in light of the above-mentioned challenges. Among the roles subject librarians are expected to play include: the role of liaison with the school and users, collection development, monitoring and evaluation, selection of e-resources, managing digital portals and carrying out user education. This paper, also, discusses the benefits that polytechnic libraries are likely to derive from adopting subject librarianship, as well as the major problems which could hamper the smooth implementation of this scheme. Additionally, this paper looks at recommendations to solve the highlighted problems.

Keywords: Polytechnic libraries, subject librarians,

Introduction

Colleges and universities have libraries that provide resources for their respective communities. They provide a variety of methods to use these resources. One of the important ways they help their community members access the resources is by providing subject librarians (SLs) who serve as experts on library resources in specific subjects.

The term "subject" in subject librarian is typically used because the SL has a specific assignment related to a subject or group of subjects at the university. In recent years, there has been a trend toward replacing the term "subject librarian" with "liaison librarian." Though the duties of the two positions are largely the same in most libraries, the term liaison emphasizes working with faculty and students in the subject areas in a liaison role—rather than the term "subject," which may imply a stronger collection development role (Wilson, 2025).

Though many articles have been written that try to define the role of an SL and describe their duties (see literature review below), no qualitative study has previously been performed that examines how they define their positions, duties, and needs related to their role. This means that the literature lacks a deep dive into the SL perspective about their position and its importance. This study seeks to alleviate this gap by reporting on a qualitative case study of the SLs at the BYU Library.

Definition of a Subject Librarian

Humphrey (2020) defines a subject librarian as a member of a library staff appointed to develop one or more aspects of a library's technical or reference service in a particular subject field. Although he would already have some experience in his field and would commonly have obtained a first or a research degree in the subject, it is not essential that he should have qualifications in the subject when he is appointed. Pinfield (2021) explains that, according to the German definition, the librarian must

have an additional master's degree or doctorate in a subject field plus what he calls a "scholarly approach to the position."

According to Smith (1974), the subject librarian is an expert in the bibliographical organization of a field of knowledge, and he utilizes this expertise to provide complexand needed services to a clientele. In the academic/research library, these services include two or more of the following: collection development, skilled assistance in maximizing the use of the collection, and an impact on the bibliographical control of the collection. To perform these services, the subject librarian must have a detailed and intimate knowledge of the needs of his total clientele, the bibliographical organization and problems of his field, and a thorough understanding of library operations, including the limitations as well as the special capabilities they provide.

Therefore, from the above and for the purposes of this paper the terms subject librarian or subject specialist are used interchangeably to refer to a professional librarian who has the requisite subject knowledge acquired formally, or has extensive experience working within a particular discipline. In fact, the title is not as important as the associated expertise; the key expertise being in-depth knowledge of a subject area and grounding in the principles of library use and organization.

Designations for Subject Librarians

Many institutions, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK), have different designations or titles for subject librarians. They are known as faculty librarians, school librarians, subject consultants, subject support officers, subject specialists, academic librarians, liaison librarians, link librarians, information librarians, information specialist, or subject librarians. According to Martin (2023), the majority of librarians in Britain prefer to be known as either a "liaison librarian" or a "subject librarian." They believe that a subject specialist denotes that one has serious subject knowledge and qualifications, whereas a subject librarian is a professional librarian who happens to look after a particular subject. At the University of Botswana Library (UBL), the term "library liaison" is used interchangeably with the term "subject librarian" (Martin, 2023).

Literature Review

Engaging subject librarians is not a new phenomenon in the library profession. It is a common practice in academic libraries in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. In fact, available literature is full of arguments favouring the use of subject librarians in providing enhanced services to readers. Ugonna (2019) suggested that there is "a confidence gap" in Africa between the reference librarian and the researcher and that such a gap could be bridged by adopting subject divisional approach. This needs not necessarily be a physical division of the library collection and procedures, provided that there are at least several reference librarians, each a subject specialist in one subject area, and each having close links with the faculty in his field. According to her, subject librarians who are conversant with the scope and terminology and expert in the literature of their subjects would offer literature searches and effective current awareness services in their respective areas to the satisfaction of faculty. This she believes will close the confidence gap.

Adelabu (2024) also supported the idea of recruiting subject librarians. He argues that "when fully established, the subject librarian will not only assume substantially important functions within the academic community but also achieve full partnership there. He contends that as he provides formal classroom instruction through in-depth reference, shoulders the responsibility of bibliographical scholarship, co-operates actively in research and education programs through collection development

and specialized bibliographical coverage, he moves toward full parity with his faculty colleagues in the teaching, research and public service functions."

Nevertheless, engaging subject librarians in academic libraries has always had its detractors. Richard Heseltine is quoted by Pinfield (2001) as predicting in 1996 the disappearance of subject librarians (or subject specialists) system in UK academic libraries and elsewhere as part of the same process as the convergence of learning support service in the University. His prediction was based on giving prominence to the functional, rather than the subject expertise of librarians. Dickinson (1978) also supported this assertion on grounds of lack of substantive training, the necessity to cover multiple subject areas and its lack of compatibility within the library organization.

Rodwell (2021) was skeptical about the success of subject librarianship in the library profession because its "future is uncertain" due to the questionable need for a 'balanced' collection, and declining resources. Fourie (1999) argued that the current state of technological development where end-users of information can easily help themselves obviates the need for information specialists or subject librarians.

Others have been more sympathetic to engaging subject librarians but have seen problems in particular areas. Law (1999) for example saw problems in the area of collection management. According to him "subject librarians tend to have highly developed territorial instincts expressed as 'my faculty or 'my subject' and a much less developed view of the library collections as a whole." Law further argued that in the electronic library, subject expertise is becoming less important claiming that "CDROM networking or HTML authoring skills may seem relevant professional skills than subject knowledge." Despite these views, most academic libraries in the UK and elsewhere still have subject librarians and show few signs of changing it. In Sweden, a number of libraries have developed a hybrid structure in which subject-oriented library departments coexist with central, function-based-departments for acquisition, cataloguing, etc. Stockholm University libraries, for example, have gone a step further and have radically divided their structure into subject based departments, which perform not only service tasks but also internal processing of new books.

In Africa, nothing big seems to have been done in the area of subject librarianship. According to Avafia (1983), this is not due to lack of appreciation of the virtues of this system of organization in academic libraries but because the resources, both human and material are very limited. For example, the Lagos University Library, which was originally designed to operate on subject divisional lines could not survive because of the shortage of appropriately qualified and experienced librarians. The University of Botswana library adopted the idea of subject librarianship in 1981 with the view to develop and maintain the subject collections in the library; provide reference and information services to all library patrons so as to provide a favourable climate for information, reference and instructional services.

The Role of Subject Librarians

According to Martin (2023), the place of subject librarians within the library organization and the extent to which they are expected to carry out non-subject duties in particular has varied. The precise role of a subject librarian differs from institution to institution. These include the following:

Collection Development

Subject librarians should engage in activities related to the development of the library collection, including the determination and coordination of selection policy, selection of materials, collection maintenance and weeding, assessment of needs of users, collection use studies and collection

evaluation. Collection development is the heart of subject librarianship in any institution. The subject librarian knows the particular strengths of the library collections and selects the appropriate library materials to support the teaching, learning, and research of a particular faculty or department.

In order to build a 'healthy' and balanced collection, both subject librarians and the faculty must participate in book selection. The responsibility of the teaching staff is to keep the collection in their respective subject fields alive and to fill existing gaps. They could respond to requests by librarians to submit lists of core or recommended textbooks for purchase to ensure a well-rounded subject collection development.

In a rapidly changing information environment, it is increasingly necessary to keep users up to date with lists of their information resources. Different subject communities are currently contributing to and making use of electronic library services at different rates and in differing ways. Subject librarians are better placed to see how elements of the library service may best fit with particular user groups. They can act as advocates for new library materials, suggesting ways in which they might be used in teaching, learning and research activities. This could be done by developing case studies or sample materials for academic staff to use and may sometimes take the subject librarian into new areas in the learning and teaching process.

Role in Reference Service

Collection development, reference service, and instruction in specific subject areas are generally assigned to subject librarians. They form close working relationship with outside subject specialists and can facilitate interdepartmental communications. Subject librarians are essential in providing specialized reference to students and faculty in their subject fields and are particularly adept at determining these user's needs. Their involvement with departments increases librarians' awareness of ongoing research and related information repositories. They assess this type of information and determine how it will complement the existing library collections and the enhancement of information delivery. In order to build up useful collections, librarians need to be prepared to actively seek out the information that may be stored elsewhere. As subject librarians, they can assist the cataloguer in the processing of such documents by providing controlled vocabulary to adequately describe the materials.

Role as Liaison

Martin, J. V. (2023) states that subject librarians also establish liaison relationships that promote cross-departmental cooperation. In a University library setting, liaising denotes cooperation, collaboration, and partnership between the subject librarian and the faculty in order to enhance teaching, learning and research activities. The main aims of acting as liaison are firstly to develop and foster direct and effective communication between the library and the academic department on all library services, and also to provide good public relations inside and outside the library. Faculty perception about librarians is partly shaped by their contributions on committees and their interactions with the faculty generally. In the view of Parker and Jackson (1998), liaison is particularly important in a world of resource-based learning where students are encouraged to carry out more independent work and make wider use of a range of learning resources. In such a system the librarian has got to be aware of the interests within the school in order to ensure the provision of adequate resources and services.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The workload of a subject librarian needs monitoring and managing carefully. Sometimes the jobs need to be reprioritized and redefined if necessary. Senior librarians need to keep the demands being made on subject librarians under review. The subject librarians themselves need to manage their own lime, and to streamline certain jobs. The subject librarian needs to monitor and evaluate developments in his particular subject areas and to alert faculty of current developments in their respective fields. They should be given opportunities to concentrate on and develop their expertise within their disciplines.

User Education

Martin, J. V. (2023) states that user education is the means through which students and faculty members, who are new in their institutions, are introduced to library facilities and services and the use of the library. It takes the form of a lecture (introductory orientation), guided tours and formal bibliographic instruction. These programs are designed to instill basic information literacy skills. Information literacy is a critical issue in higher education. If it is effectively carried out by subject librarians, it stimulates the interest of both students and lecturers in the use of the library's resources. Increasingly, there is a movement towards resource-based teaching and resource-based learning, which provide students with opportunities to develop the skills required to become independent researchers and academics.

Efficient user education is achieved by subject librarians because of their in-depth knowledge of the literature of a subject area. Subject librarians working with small groups of students in their subject areas can effectively teach library literacy, thus supplementing formal classroom lectures, as well as increasing the use of the library's resources.

Role in the ICT Environment

Adedeji Adelabu. (2024) says that developments in computers, microelectronics, and communication technologies have radically changed the library and information environment. Traditional libraries were dominated by print publications and access mechanisms were also by-and-large manual. The shift from print to digital information available via the Internet can provide end-users with seamless connection to Internet-based services. This new technology has not only enhanced the potential range of publications that libraries could provide for their users, but also the speed with which requests can be met.

Subject librarians' role in the ICT environment can be seen in two main ways namely the selection of e-resources and managing the digital projects, such as institutional repositories.

Selection of e-Resources

Liaison with users and technical colleagues is also important when it comes to selection of electronic materials. The information landscape has undergone a rapid revolution. Currently information could be found in different formats such as e-books, CD-ROM, online journals and databases. A subject librarian has the primary responsibility for the selection of these materials and then acts as the purchaser. He ensures that the selection of e-resources is in line with the general collection development policy (CDP). The selection of e-resources also involves the evaluation of the material and other factors such as format, content, interface, access method, licensing, authentication and other technical requirements.

It should be emphasized that not all the polytechnic libraries in Nigeria have reached the stage where print journals are replaced with electronic ones but the issue is becoming a real one. Currently, with the help of some donor agencies, some polytechnic libraries in Nigeria are having access to online e-journals and other databases.

Digital Projects

Another area in which subject librarians can play an essential role is in the development of digital projects and with institutional repositories (IR), specifically with decisions regarding content, matter and user needs. Subject librarian's instructional skills, subject knowledge, and unique and essential customer service perspective is invaluable in this regard. Vondracek (2023) discussed how subject specialists bring value to the digital life cycle with scouting and identification, selection, digitization and description, providing context, interface design, and promotion. In her view, "…the very skills that ensure their success as selectors also equip them to contribute throughout the creation of the digital library…with multiple benefits for end users."

According to Pinfield (2021) subject librarians can be effective in their role as an "intermediary" between patrons and the technical staff by using librarians and staff with differing skills and talents from a variety of departments to form teams that are efficient. According to Bailey (2025), the reference librarians are a library's eyes and ears. They understand user needs and perceptions. They know what is working and what is not. They know how to help, inform, persuade, and teach users. For an IR to succeed, it is essential that subject librarians be involved in its planning, implementation, and operation.

Information skills training

Information skills' training is becoming an increasingly important element of the subject librarian's role. This role is expanding to include research skills training as well as information literacy education. The importance of subject librarians as teachers is also gradually being acknowledged. Apart from teaching students the bibliographic instructions, subject librarians could teach users how to search for quality information on the Internet using search engines, subject directories and subject gateways. This would enable them search for information for their assignments and project works independently.

The involvement of subject librarians in the polytechnic and training opportunities can also raise the profile of the library. This is especially true when training involves innovative methods and the exploitation of electronic resources. It is clear that the skills of subject librarians in this area are still not fully appreciated within some Polytechnic communities. Pinfield (2021) cites a study carried out in the USA by D'Esposito and Gardner (1999) on the perceptions of undergraduate students on the Internet and the library which revealed among others the ignorance of some students when it comes to sourcing for information.

New Ways of Dealing with Enquiries

Instead of the traditional ways of dealing with enquiry, subject librarians can do so through personal e-mail and mailing list enquiries. By so doing they can now provide specialist back up for those on enquiry desks. When relevant information is found, e-mails are used to transmit them to the affected students and lecturers.

Benefits of Subject Librarians

1. Subject librarianship achieves a more efficient liaison between the library and the faculties. Through this scheme, there is a constant flow of ideas between librarians and the school (lecturers). The problems of the school are carried to the libraries for effective solutions, whilst those of the library are sympathetically likened to by members of the school. Through that the
relationship becomes harmonious and mutually beneficial.
2. The most logical approach to collection development appears to be by subject. Subject librarians are therefore the most effective selectors of books because they have both the subject knowledge and the bibliographic skills to achieve this goal. Another important aspect of collection development is stock revision. A decision is made on which books should be bound, which should be replaced with new editions, which retired from active service or discarded. A subject librarian is in a better position to know what books are relevant and can meaningfully effect stock revision.
3. Subject librarianship facilitates the efficient use of professional staff and maximizes the utilization of staff expertise and qualities. Professional librarians spend a great deal of their time performing routine tasks which could be handled by non-professionals.
4. A subject librarian is more likely to provide an efficient reference and bibliographic service because he or she is aware of the research interests of members of his faculty and can offer personalized services. Efficient bibliographic help could be given to teaching and research staff because the subject librarian is familiar with his subject and greater client satisfaction can be achieved. This fosters a crucial symbiotic relationship between user, materials and specially trained staff.
5. Subject librarians operate within the subject divisional system and are exposed to a wide range of library duties which offer greater job and intellectual satisfaction. They see their jobs in terms of continuously extending and developing their knowledge as well as making creative use of it. Intellectual satisfaction is thus achieved by the subject librarian when he or she is able to satisfy the academic needs of their users.

Problems

Recruitment of Staff

One serious problem is the recruitment of suitable staff with the relevant subject background and experience to operate the subject divisional system. It is difficult to consistently recruit staff with readymade relevant qualification in the field needed in disciplines such as library and information science, engineering, and sciences. The tendency therefore is to assign subject areas to those librarians without qualifications in such fields. It takes time, depending on the enthusiasm and personal abilities of the staff, to develop and be familiar with the literature and bibliography of his subject. There is the need to change the recruitment pattern of professional librarians in the polytechnic library in the Nigeria. Graduates with the requisite subject background could be employed and trained as subject librarians.

Added to the above is the problem of staff turnover which frequently occurs after investment has been made in the training of a subject librarian. Perhaps the recruitment of graduate assistants in the relevant subject areas, as it is done in the Polytechnics of Nigeria, to serve one year in the library before being granted study leave with pay to study librarianship could do the trick. For if young graduates are made aware of the fact that librarians are offered the same conditions of service as lecturers, they may be attracted to the profession.

Poor Job Definition

Another major problem of subject librarianship is that there is always poor job definition or specifications and performance is often very inadequate. Such inadequacies have given the whole concept a bad image because it has been seen as expensive, wasteful and unproductive. The danger with this misconception is that the benefits of such a scheme are easily lost which could lead to its abandonment. Supervision would have to be stepped up to ensure performance.

Lack of In-Service Training Programs

There is also a lack of requisite in-service training programme for librarians after their professional training. Continuous professional development should be career long and should match changes in personal circumstances with changes in organizational structures and job requirements. For subject librarians to be multi-skilled information personnel they require a variety of training needs which include: training in the management of change in order to respond to new roles, responsibilities and, in some cases, new locations; communication skills in order to work effectively with individuals, groups and committees; training in time management in order to plan and prioritize their increased workload; training in teaching and learning methods and skills to improve user education and training in the use and evaluation of electronic resources, especially the Internet.

Conclusion

Information is a keyword in today and tomorrow's society. A well-developed library system with relevant educated personnel is a condition for meeting the challenges of the information society. In order to be able to carry out quality reference work, the professional librarian must have good knowledge of the relevant bibliographic sources concerning his/her field both in print and electronic form. It is not a matter of knowing a lot, but it is also important how one can systemize, store, secure and, not the least, retrieve relevant information for their users.

The primary mission of a university library is to support the teaching, learning and research activity of the institution of which they are part by providing access to information resources. The subject librarianship scheme is one effective way in which these aims could be achieved. It would ensure that the library remains user-centered at all times. Subject librarians provide an important interface between the user and the library. They can help to ensure that their services are directed towards the needs of users and also be instrumental in developing and implementing new services, which proactively address the changing user needs. Thus, by liaising with the faculty, the subject librarian ensures effective communication with all the academic departments for all the library's services. Academic libraries in Ghana should seriously think of employing subject librarians to ensure the provision of quality services.

Recommendations

It is recommended that polytechnic libraries in Nigeria should consider adopting a subject divisional approach. As a start, subject area should be assigned to librarians taking into consideration their academic backgrounds and interests. Members of staff assigned subject areas could be consulted by the reader services librarian on any enquiries pertaining to a particular subject field which he or she was unable to satisfy user needs. What is crucial is that such librarians should be conversant with the structure of the literature, key terminologies, concepts and the teaching and research techniques in those subjects.

Efforts should be made to organize in-service training/courses for professional librarians in the Nigerian polytechnic libraries either within the same work place or outside to develop and sharpen their communication and negotiation skills which could kick start the subject librarianship idea. There is the need to recruit science graduates into the profession in order to correct the imbalance which now favours the arts and humanities graduates.

This could be done by allowing attracting graduates to join the profession by pursuing the professional course. If possible, the libraries should provide scholarships to them to cover the expenses they would incur whilst on the course and made to a sign bond to serve such institutions for a stipulated number of years after they have qualified. Senior members who already possess the professional qualification and who have interest in certain subject areas particularly in the sciences should be made to go through some kind of training which will make them conversant with the literature in the sciences.

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