

EVALUATION OF REFERENCE SERVICES IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THREE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

Philip U. Akor (Ph.D)¹ & Jibril A. Alhassan (Ph.D)²

¹Library and Information Technology Department,

²Library Services Department,

^{1&2}Federal University of Technology, Minna. Nigeria

Email: puakor@gmail.com Phone No.: +234-803-688-0881

Abstract

The major purpose of this study was to evaluate reference services in academic libraries in Nigeria. In carrying out this study, 4 research questions were posed. The population of the study consisted of 200 students, (100 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 of 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: Academic Libraries, Reference Services, Current Awareness Services, Digital reference Services, Makurdi and Mkar.

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 Readers Service Division. Among the public service functions of a library the greater part of it is performed by the Reference Units of the library. 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 service in Nigerian libraries is an age long tradition as reference librarians serve as pilots toward directing information seekers on the latest information that are inherent in a particular field of human endeavor; the provision of qualitative reference service will no doubt promote research and development for national development.

Reference service can be attributed to Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) as well as Current Awareness Services (CAS). Reference Librarian should be able to provide some selected information that are relevant to the researcher and also create an enabling environment where the researcher, investigator or the information seeker can get current information that would 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 reference 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) stated 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 Units serve as the link between the library and its immediate clientele be they public, community or groups of special 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 documents, 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. Reference Unit of the library has the human and material resources to provide answers to any information needs by the users, 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.

Reitz (2004) alleged that reference services are all the functions performed by a trained librarian employed in the reference unit of a library to meet the information needs of the patrons (in person, by telephone, or electronically). Other functions of reference librarians include: answering substantive questions, instructing users in the selection and use of appropriate tools and techniques for finding information, conducting searches on behalf of the patrons, 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.

Udensi and Akor (2014) stated that essence of evaluating reference services are: To check the current status of the service; To discover methods for immediate and language improvement and after: To determine the need for modification of goals and philosophy of source. In practical terms, the analysis may be necessary to justify budget request, to

determine the requirements for additional staff and to support changes in physical surroundings.

They further discussed two types of evaluation in reference services which include: Indirect and Direct Evaluation. Indirect evaluation concerns budget, personnel and among other things, the size, age and value of the reference collection including all types of methods inside and outside the library which may be employed for reference service. While in the case of Direct evaluation, ideally Reference librarians combine both direct and indirect evaluation in any study; it is, in fact, hard to separate them entirely from the above reason, that one can hardly answer questions well (direct) without proper resources (indirect). Information resources in the Reference sections of the three university libraries under study are grossly inadequate. Most of the reference librarians lack the required qualities of reference librarians that will enable them perform their duties efficiently. The researcher was worried about inadequate information resources both (human and material resources}, therefore decided to evaluate reference services in three universities in Nigeria.

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:

- (i). To find out the available reference services in the libraries;
- (ii). To ascertain the extent to which reference services provided in the libraries suit the Users.
- (iii). To examine the level of adequacy of the reference sources provided in the libraries.
- (iv). To find out the users' Perceptions on reference queries in the libraries under study.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study

- (i). What are the reference services available in the libraries under study?
- (ii). To what extent do the reference services provided in the libraries suit the users?
- (iii). What is the level of adequacy of the reference services provided in the libraries under study?
- (iv). What are the users' perceptions on reference queries in the libraries under study?

Statement of the Problem

Reference work involves the interplay of three factors – the library audience, the reference collection and the reference librarian. The reference librarian plays the role of an intermediary between the library audience and the word of books in the library. His skill in matching the right book with the right audience will distinguish him as a reference librarian par excellence. A reference librarian should possess certain personality traits to enable him/her to carry out its duties to clientele efficiently. Thomas, Hinkey and Eisenbach (1991) were of the opinion that a good reference librarian should be ... tactful; intelligent, imaginative, ingenious, helpful, empathic, curious, persistent, energetic, sensitive, polite and assured. Reference librarians should be able to both listen and answer questions almost simultaneously, should have a good memory, be smart and of cheerful disposition.

Reference Librarians should always be ready to meet with clientele without losing balance or a sense of humour. Unfortunately most of the reference librarians lack the required qualities of reference librarians that will enable them perform their duties efficiently. Udensi and Akor (2014) observed that the major obstacle associated with reference service is inadequate information resources in the reference sections of the libraries. Because such observations as these were not really conclusive and were not backed up by any empirical research evidence, the researcher therefore decided to evaluate reference services in three universities in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Many authors and scholars have written so much on reference services. In the view of Udensi and Akor (2014) and Reitz (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. Nwalo (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, access and dissemination of information.

In the view of Palmer (1999) and Lessick (2000). Chowdhury (2000), Lankes (2000), 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). They highlighted that there 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, among others.

According to Bopp and Smith (2001), historians of reference service traced modern concepts of reference work to Samuel Green's 1876 paper, 'Personal relations between librarians and readers' The paper were 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 his speech in the first meeting of the American Library Association, Green discussed the need for librarians to actively assist members of their communities in using library resources.

Udensi and Akor (2014) 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 and 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, stated that 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 Udensi and Akor (2014) 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.

Reitz (2004) asserted that 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, librarians and libraries must adapt to new roles and skills to cope with change. However, reference librarians must acquire relevant skills and competence needed to use ICT in providing reference services to users. Shibanda (2001) believed 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, Bopp and Smith (2001) contended 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) supported this view when he noted that the

changing role requires that librarians learn new ways of performing their duties. He added that computer literacy is of paramount importance to library professionals not only in Nigeria but other developing countries. Ademodi and Adepoju (2009) contended 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.

Research Methods

Survey research design was used to carry out this study on evaluation of 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 questionnaire. 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 data for the study were presented in tables and was analyzed using simple percentages

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

Out of 200 copies of questionnaire that were administered to the library users, 120 (60%) were retrieved.

Table 1: Reference services provided in the libraries

Reference service	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Answering reference queries	112	93.3
Digital reference services	34	28.3
Referral services	108	90

Table 1 reveals that the highest response rate of 112(93.3%) was indicated for answering reference queries in the reference section. This is followed by 108(90%) for the referral services while provision of digital reference services has the lowest 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 in the libraries studied.

Table 2: Extent of reference service provision to users in the libraries studied

Reference services	Very high	High	Average	Low	Very low
Answering reference queries	84	33	3	-	-
Provision of reference materials	47	56	11	6	-
Provision of theses/dissertations	23	51	38	7	1
Provision of photocopying of reference materials	41	59	-	-	-
Providing referral services	13	27	65	9	6
Total	208	226	117	22	7

The extents of reference services provided to users are revealed in Table 2. Answering of reference queries is very high with a response rate of 208, while that of provision of

reference materials is high with response rate of 226 response rates indicated that the provision of theses/dissertations are high. Provision of photocopying of reference materials is high with response rate of 59, while that of providing referral services is average with response rate of 65. The result showed that provision of reference services is high. The provisions of referral services are average.

Table 3: The level of adequacy of the reference services provided in the libraries under study

Reference sources	Very Adequate	Adequate	Inadequate	Very Inadequate
Encyclopedia	9	88	12	-
Dictionaries	34	67	-	-
Manuals	7	56	34	-
Maps	-	71	39	-
Calendars	-	29	76	9
Biographies	-	67	19	34
Bibliographies	-	12	34	-
Abstract and Indexes	37	59	23	1
Government documents	14	26	32	45
Theses/Dissertations	27	34	12	9
Total	128	509	281	98

Table 3 shows the level of adequacy. Majority of the respondents signified the adequacy of reference services with overall response rate of 509. This was followed by inadequate with a score of 281, very adequate has 128 while very inadequate has score of 98. 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.

Table 4: Users' perceptions on reference queries in the libraries

Perceptions on reference queries	SA	A	D	SD
It helps the user to be directed to the location of reference materials	6	43	5	-
It aids users in information retrieval	97	23	-	-
It aids users in selecting the right information material	19	77	24	-
It provides the users the right information at the right time in the right format	9	36	42	3
It enhances their searches and satisfies their information needs	67	42	9	2
Total	259	221	80	5

From table 4, it is observed that majority of the respondents indicated that they strongly agree with a response rate of 259. This is followed by 221 response rate which indicated agreed. 80 and 5 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 satisfy their information needs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be concluded that the essence of evaluating reference service are to check current status of the service, to discover methods for immediate and language improvement and after: To determine the need for medication of goals and philosophy of source. In practical terms, the analysis may be necessary to justify budget requests, to determine the requirements for added staff, to support changes in physical surroundings, operation of data base, and or membership in a network.

The study recommends that reference librarians are to embrace better qualities of good reference librarians. More qualified reference librarians should be employed for efficient service delivery, Also that more current information resources should be purchased and stocked in the reference units of the libraries. Reference librarians should be encouraged to be attending conferences and workshops in the area of reference services.

References

- Ademodi, D. T. & Adepoju, E. O. (2009). Computer skill among librarians in academic libraries in Ondo and Ekiti States, Nigeria. *Library Philosophy and Practice*.
- Bopp, & Smith, (2001). *Reference and information services: An introduction – 3rd ed*. Englewood: Libraries unlimited.
- Burke, L. (2003). The future role of librarians in the virtual library environment. *The Australian Library Journal*, 51 (1), 1-16.
- Chowdhury, G. G. & Chowdhury, S. (2003). *Introduction to digital libraries*. London: Facet Publishing.
- Collins, J. W. & Kasowitz, A. S. (2000). *Digital reference services in the new millennium: Planning, management and evaluation*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publications. Pp. 1-10.
- Garuba, A. R. (2007). Impact of automation on library staff: A case study of John Harris Library, University of Benin. *Nigeria Library Link*, 5, 83.
- Gross, M., McClure, C. R. & Lankes, R. D. (2001). Assessing quality in digital reference services: Overview of key literature on digital reference. *Florida: Information Institute. 'Guidelines for information services'. (July 2000). Available at <http://www.ala.org/rusa/rusaprotools/referenceguide/guidelinesinformation.htm>. Accessed November, 2914*

- Janes, J. (2002). *What is reference for?* Available at <http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotools/futureofref/whatreference.htm>. Accessed 22nd September, 2014.
- Lanks, R. D. (2000). The foundations of digital reference'. In Lanks, R. D.
- Lipow, A. G. (1999). *Serving the remote user: Reference service in the digital environment*. Available at <http://www.csu.edu.au/special/online99/proceedings99/200.htm>. Accessed August, 2014.
- Nwachukwu, V. N. (2004). Computer skill competencies among academic librarians: An imperative for the computerization of Nigerian university libraries. *The Nigerian Library Link*, 2(1).
- Nwalo, K. I. N. (2000). *Reference sources and service – Ibadan: Centre for external studies*. University of Ibadan. Pp.13-34.
- Olalokun, S. O. (2003). Practical reference service in libraries: The Nigerian perspectives. *Lagos Journal of Library and Information Science*, 1, 85-90.
- Palmer, S. S. (1999). *Creating our role as reference librarians of the future: Fate or choice*. Proceedings of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Ninth National Conference, Chicago.
- Raghavan, A. (2000). *Role of librarians: Paradigm shifts – past to present*. CONSAL XI, Singapore: CONSAL.
- Reitz, J. M. (2004). *Dictionary for library and information science*. London: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Sallis, E. & Jones, G. (2002). *Knowledge management in education: Enhancing learning and education*. London: Kogan Page.
- Shibanda, G. G. (2000). Managing and strategising Africa's information in global computerization. *Library Management*, 21 (4 & 5).
- Schement, J. R. ed. (2002). *Encyclopedia of communication and information*. New York: Gale Group.
- Tedd, L. A. (2003). *Challenges facing information professionals' in global knowledge renaissance: Selected papers from the World Library Summit 2002*. Singapore: Times Book International.
- Thomas, D. M., Hinkley, A. T. & Eisenbach, E. T. (1991). *The effectiveness of reference librarian*. London: Academic Press.

Udensi, J. N. & Akor, P. U. (2014). *Fundamentals of library and information science*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello Press Limited.

Wasik, J. M. (2004). *Building and maintaining digital reference services*. Available at <http://www.michaellorenzen.com/eric/ref-serv.html>. Accessed August 20, 2012.