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SUBJECT SPECIALIZATION IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: A REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS OF ANAMBRA STATE SCENE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

The whole purpose of staff recruitment, development and evaluation is defeated if an enabling environment is not created for the staff to make a more effective contribution to the library's total effort in service mission. This survey therefore, takes a critical look at the challenges of complex modern client - oriented library services which requires integration of persons of diverse and specialized competence in the overall academic library service delivery. Anambra state perspective is brought under focus in an effort to generalize the role of subject specialists in academic library services. Recommendations are made in line with the findings.

INTRODUCTION

Subject Specialist in Librarianship Defined

Humphreys (1967), defined a subject specialist 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. He would normally already have some experience in his field and would commonly have obtained a first or research degree in the subject. In some instances, it may not be essential that he should have qualifications in the subject at the time of his appointment.

According to Holbrook (1972), a subject specialist is a member of the library staff appointed to organize library services in a particular subject field. This subject field may be fairly narrow, or more typically, be broad enough to cover an umbrella of related disciplines contained in a faculty/school / college / departmental structure. The subject specialist's responsibility for developing the services and maximizing the use of the

library's resources in his area implies a wide variety of duties. The subject specialist would normally have obtained at least a first degree in the subject concerned, this is supplemented by a postgraduate course in librarianship.

Ogundipe (2005), recorded that the concept of subject specialization in librarianship had always existed in the past when the subject specialist was the scholar in the library. Subject specialization had also existed for some times as subject divisions or branches of academic and research libraries and the professional staff in these divisions and branches were the specialist who had acquired considerable knowledge and expertise during long period of work in these branch libraries and who can be relied upon when called on either from headquarters or by the chief librarian to produce specialist information from their faculty or divisional collections. They had much knowledge, but their impact was not much and there was not much aggressive dissemination of knowledge. Current awareness services were informal and personal, and the sense of service was passive.

In recent times, the subject specialist is regarded as a "knowledge worker" with expertise in bibliographic organization of any subject field which he uses as the basis for the development of the knowledge of the literature of his subject field. He is responsible for collection development in his subject area, skilled assistance in maximizing the use and exploitation of information from the collection and other bibliographic control, cataloguing, classifying and documentation of the collection in his subject field. He should bring to his job a thorough understanding of library operations, the skills of bibliographic dissemination of information and he should acquire as soon as possible a detailed intimate knowledge of the needs and requirements of his users (Ogundipe, 2005).

The Problem

The early indigenous Nigerian Librarians were mainly subject specialists. This was because the premier library school in this country, the Institute of Librarianship, University of Ibadan, admitted only graduates of diverse backgrounds into their postgraduate diploma programme. The master of library studies programme which replaced the postgraduate diploma also admitted only graduates of different disciplines.

However, with the establishment of many library schools in Nigeria since the early seventies, some university - based and others polytechnic-based, many first degree programmes and diplomas came to be introduced. This new development was to have a tremendous negative impact on the training of subject specialists for Nigerian Libraries. Many library schools admitted BLS and B.LIS graduates into their MLS programmes in preference to other graduates of science, the humanities and social sciences.

A true picture of what has happened in the area of library schools development in Nigeria is aptly captured by Ojo-Igbinoba (1993), with sixteen library schools in Nigeria today. It is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Library Schools in Nigeria as at 2009

S/N	Institution	Year course established	Name of the dept.	Programme / degree awarded
1	University of Ibadan	1960	Institute of librarianship	Dip. Lib. Studies
B	University of Ibadan	1969	Library studies	M.Phil/Ph.D, MLS
C	University of Ibadan	1984	LARIS	M.Phi/Ph.D, MLS
D	University of Ibadan	1990	ARCIS	M.Inf. Sc; Ph.D
2	Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	1968	Lib. & Inf. Science	BLS; MLS
3	Bayero University, Kano	1977	Lib. Sc.	B. LIS
4	University of Maduguri	1978	Lib. Sc.	BLS, MLS
5	University of Nigeria, Nsukka	1986	Lib. Sc.	B. A; B. Sc; b. Ed., MLS; Ph.D
6	Imo State University, Owerri	1990	Lib. Studies	BLS, MLS, M.Sc, Ph.D
7	Delta State University, f Abraka	1991	Lib. Sc.	Dip. Lib. Sc; B.A, Edu; BLS; MLS, Ph.D
8	Ambrose Ali Univ., Ekpoma	1991	Lib. Sc.	Dip. Lib. Sc; B. LIS.
9	Enugu State Univ. of Science & Tech., ESUT	1991	Lib. Sc.	BLS; B.Ed.
10	Nnamdi Azikiwe Univ., Awka	1991	Lib. Studies	BLS; B.Ed; MLS
11	Abia State Univ., Uturu	1991	Lib. Studies	B.Ed; B. Sc.
12	Madonna Univ., Okija	1991	Lib. Science	B.LIS; MLS; Ph.D
13	Federal Polytechnic, Nekede	1970	Lib. Science	ND; HND
14	Federal Polytechnic, Oko	1988	Lib. Science	ND; HND
15	Federal Polytechnic, Offa	2001	Lib. Science	ND; HND
16	College of Education Port - Harcourt	1982	Lib. Studies	B.Ed.

Adapted from Ojo-Igbinoba (2003) and JAMB (2006).

Thus, when many first degree programmes were introduced in some library schools and National and Higher National Diploma programmes in some polytechnics, there was less emphasis on the admission of best graduates in science, arts, law, engineering, technology, medical sciences etc. into the postgraduate programmes of the library schools. This unhappy trend may have contributed in no small measure to the dearth of subject librarians in our academic libraries. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, taking cognizance of the importance and necessarily of subject specialists even at the school library level, introduced what Muogilim (2001) tagged "The Unizik Triple Qualification Programmes". This programme involved a dual qualification in which an employee who desires to make a career in this system must first and foremost be a teaching subject specialist. Then a librarianship qualification obtained at undergraduate or postgraduate level would be a definite advantage. Even the Unizik Triple qualification programme comprised a teaching subject, education and librarianship courses. Muogilim (2001), recorded that this dual qualification had been unconvincingly advocated by Bullock (1975) and Fayose (1981, 1985).

It has been the perception of many scholars that the problem still remains with us. The problem is that while the demands of modern library services increases, the need for subject librarians, the new programmes in our universities offer fewer places to graduates of other disciplines other than librarianship. The ever increasing need for lawyers to render specialized services in law libraries, doctors, pharmacists, nurses and medical laboratory scientists or graduates of related medical sciences for medical libraries, engineers for universities of technology libraries, and agricultural engineering graduates for universities of agriculture libraries, could only be satisfied by giving more places in our library schools to fresh graduates of medicine, law, pharmacy, engineering, science, nursing etc. who would h turn function as subject specialists in these libraries that handle special and highly technical clientele.

The Roles and Place of the Subject Specialist Librarian

Ogundipe (2005), outlined the various functions of the subject-based librarian. Also Crossley (1974), provided in details the objectives as put forward by the university of Bradford Library. The main points are as follows:

- (a) To provide a stock of books and other library materials designed to serve the total readership of the library concerned within a given subject area.
- (b) To provide assistance to readers in their search for information within the subject area for which the subject specialist is responsible.

- (c) To provide tuition in the use of bibliographic and reference work so that a reader may find information for himself in the appropriate subject area.
- (d) To provide liaison between teaching staff and the library service in the relevant subject area.
- (e) To provide bibliographies, guides, abstracts, reading lists etc. for readers in his own subject area.
- (f) To provide assistance with classification and cataloguing problems and to help in these processes within his subject area.

Avafia (1983), wraps it up when he recorded that; the library is a service institution which is client-oriented. A subject librarian is more likely to provide an efficient reference and bibliographic service than a generalist librarian as he is more familiar with his particular subject, thus greater client satisfaction can be achieved.

Efficient bibliographic help could be given to teaching and research staff because the subject librarian is aware of the subject interests of the various members of his faculty and can offer a personal service. This fosters a crucial symbiotic relationship between users, materials, and especially trained staff. Readers in the university tend to investigate specific subject areas and would be happy to deal with an individual subject librarian who knows and can solve their problems.

Looking at the academic background of many law librarians in Nigeria, it is gratifying to realize that many lawyers have undertaken postgraduate studies in librarianship. Doctors, pharmacists and engineers should emulate the lawyers. This, the law librarian as a subject specialist is the law library which has the opportunity to make use of his knowledge and to derive intellectual satisfaction by his varied and intellectual use of it to meet readers needs in the law faculties.

Also the academic profiles of some notable librarians in Nigeria indicate that quite a good number of scientists like physicists, chemists, biologists, geologists are already offering specialized services to users in various academic libraries in Nigeria. There are also many with backgrounds in the humanities. This subject specialist becomes a happier and more dignified practitioner of his art.

Holbrook (1984), then recorded that because of the subject librarians elevated educational and professional background, he can henceforth contribute more

meaningfully to the bibliography of his subject field by compiling better and more useful bibliographies of his subject field. Moreover, with his sound subject knowledge, he can write papers on his field and fill gaps in bibliographies.

Available data in Nigeria do not indicate that there are medical doctors, pharmacists, nurses etc who have taken postgraduate studies in librarianship. Thus, subject specialized services in Nigerian medical and hospital libraries are still in the hands of biologists and generalist librarians. This is still an unhappy trend in library service delivery in this country.

The Anambra State Scene

Table 2 shows the distribution of professional librarians and subject specialist librarians in Anambra state academic libraries. Although data are not readily available from some libraries, which is still part of the limitations of this study, the study considers only professional librarians with minimum qualifications of BLS or B.LIS or MLS.

Table 2: Distribution of subject-librarians in Anambra State, 2009.

S/N	Library / Library School	No. of professional librarians	No. of subject specialists	%
1	Nnamdi Azikiwe University Library, Awka & Nnewi.	-	-	-
2	Anambra state University Library, Uli & Igbariam.	8	4	50%
3	Madonna University Library, Okija.	1	1	100%
4	St. Paul's University College Awka.	3	1	10%
5	Nwafor-Orizu College of Education Library, Nsugbe.	-	-	-
6	Federal Polytechnic Library, Oko.	10	1	10%
7	Nnamdi Azikiwe University Library School.	7	7	100%
8	Madonna University Library School.	6	3	50%
9	Federal Polytechnic Library School, Oko.	11	4	36%

Source of data: From oral interview with the librarians and head of Departments.

From the above figures, it could easily be seen that academic libraries in Anambra state are still very much underserved by subject specialist librarians. One of the reasons for this situation is that there is a dearth of this cadre of manpower in this country. One may even consider the fact that since the normal minimum qualification for a subject specialist is a good degree in any subject plus postgraduate professional training in librarianship, many first degree holders would usually prefer a postgraduate degree in their chosen fields rather than such a degree in an entirely new discipline.

Conclusion

This paper from the foregoing has argued that the best for an improved qualitative approach to readers' services, strong clientele - oriented services is the subject specialist. There is still an acute shortage of this cadre of manpower in our academic libraries. This situation cannot be allowed to linger as academic libraries in Nigeria cannot afford to dispense with the services of the subject librarian which as Holbrook puts it, he must be a policy maker, an educator, an academic and a manager. Ogundipe's (2005), characterization becomes relevant here. "The question has been asked whether the generalist reference librarian should be phased out for the subject specialist, to which my answer is clearly yes. Would subject specialist have to cover so many fields that they would lose their specialty and sacrifice in depth? My answer would be that this may be so initially and it may require the support of other staff to keep the system moving until enough subject specialists are available to fully take over and that, this would then result in increased performance and more professionalism for the academic librarians."

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