

Vision of the Future Academic Libraries in Ghana

By

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Abstract

Academic libraries in Ghana as a whole face some challenges in supporting teaching, learning, research, and knowledge dissemination. Because of a profound ongoing shift in context, however, the vision for academic libraries in Ghana will be to optimally ensure the survival of values that the library has represented in the academic sphere for its future existence. These include open access to scholarly information and cultural heritage, digitisation, service to students and scholars. Librarians also strongly need to collaborate closely not only as professionals but with partners in other areas of higher education and cognate fields. Their leadership role in information management and provision must create a coherent environment to facilitate the maximum use of scholarly information in all its forms. The future academic library will need a team of flexible experts with a variety of aptitudes and specialisations who collaborate as researchers, managers, skilled technologists, and proactive in the fulfilment of the mission of their respective universities. And there is no doubt that the future of academic libraries will be different from the one we know now. The paper makes use of literature review and attempts to make some recommendations to ensure the survival of future academic libraries as an institution to sustain their values of access to high-quality information, preservation and dissemination. It also makes a case for academic libraries to consider how to remain trusted and indispensable in a fast-evolving environment – while controlling costs.

Keywords: *Open access, networking, information literacy, digitisation, institutional repositories*

Introduction

Academic libraries have long been recognised as the "hearts" of their universities or institutions. In Ghana, they face the same challenges in supporting teaching, learning, research, and knowledge dissemination. To fulfil their mission of supporting the educational objectives of their parent bodies, these libraries develop and maintain standard books, journals, and audio-visual collections and services. The rapid changes in higher education in Ghana are prompting library and information professionals to reflect on the nature of the services they provide and on the appropriateness of their skills. According to Paterson (1999), "a library is an investment in humanity, in its progress and its struggles and its traditions".

Because of a profound ongoing shift in context, however, the vision for academic libraries will be to work aggressively to ensure the survival of values that the library has represented in the academic sphere for its future existence. In trying to envision the future of academic libraries, it is essential to consider the nexus between the person and technology.

Academic librarians, especially subject librarians, should explore the kind of skills which will be required in the foreseeable future to offer optimal services to their patrons. Badu (2004) noted that, while technological developments clearly have important implications for libraries, they should not overshadow the more people-oriented skills which are equally essential for organising and providing effective services. He then makes practical suggestions concerning specific groups of skills including improving credibility with academic staff, giving guidance on teaching information skills, focusing on particular IT-related skills and acquiring key management skills such as managing change, finance and strategic awareness. He also addresses the responsibilities of the library's management and the individual to ensure that skills are harnessed through co-ordination and continuity. In this way they will benefit the both individual staff and the wider academic community.

Some challenges of academic libraries in Ghana

Academic libraries are regarded as the best developed among the libraries in Ghana, in respect of their buildings, professional staff, collection development, equipment and services. These libraries seem to have common problems and prospects for the future. An academic library is a library which serves an institution of higher learning, such as a college of education, a university and a polytechnic.

For decades, Academic libraries in Ghana have been the main sources of information in their localities. They acquire, process and disseminate documents and other forms of information

not only to support the study, teaching, learning and research activities of their parent institutions, but they also provide information for decision-makers in government, industry, trade and commerce. They again make provision for access to research information in the form of theses, dissertations and reports for local as well as foreign scholars.

In spite of the important role they play in support of higher education, research and national development, university libraries in Ghana have been strangely neglected Antwi, (1997). Despite many pronouncements by the chief executives of their parent institutions in recognition of their importance as the lifeblood or nerve centre in a university, these libraries have largely been left with minimal support. According to Kisiedu (2009?:7) the enormous constraints of grossly inadequate funding, severely limited access to materials and information, inadequate human and material resources that African university libraries face are also well documented, but they have remained largely un-addressed. Strategies aimed at revitalizing university level education have been widely discussed by bodies such as the Association of African Universities (AAU), but libraries have remained at the periphery of such discussion, that is, if they are lucky to get mentioned in the first place (AAU 2001). An AAU sponsored study by De Bruijn and Robertson (1979: 7) concluded that "... Libraries in African universities have been left to decline to a pitiable state".

Some effort has been made to meet a number of the challenges that confront these libraries in the new millennium, but largely with donor support. For example, a study by Kisiedu (2009?) revealed that in the last five to ten years, African university libraries have been the focus of institutional studies and conferences, whose main purpose has been to analyse the situation of the libraries in order to provide the lacking baseline data that should form the basis of a strategic plan for addressing their numerous problems.

Collection Development

Currently, the bulk of the collections in academic libraries in Ghana are in print format such as encyclopaedias, handbooks, textbooks, journals to name a few. Both the printed and electronic sources have their usefulness. The print format is convenient to majority of users in our part of the world because they are easy to use or access. It is a convenient mode of information since it can be moved around and a very useful backup. However, the ability to access computers and for that matter the Internet is difficult to come by as most users are not computer literate. Electronic resources on the other hand, have a richer mixture of content, and to a large extent very good information searching and retrieval abilities. The future should be the other way round where majority of their holdings are electronic with backup files. Academic libraries in Ghana will therefore have to review or update their collection development policies and procedures to reflect the changing dynamics. This then can help identify scholarly materials easily since there are many bibliographic tools to use. This however has its challenges. Asamoah-Hassan (1998) argues that with this, actual selection will be difficult because there will be many materials available and one will have to note that there will be a problem in deciding what mode to lay more emphasis on in developing the collection; print or electronic.

Demas (1995) is also of the view that it is time collection development librarians focus intensively on the processes of collection development as applied to networked and other electronic resources... applying the principles of selection to Internet accessible resources is but one part of a longer challenge, basically learning how to select among a wide variety of potential access mechanisms. This will make us offer satisfactory services to our clients of today.

Change in Library services

According to Line (1990) the future of the academic library with clear and precise objectives, must be concerned with people, those it serves and those who serve them. It is a customer based library. Once customers' needs are identified, the library should therefore think of what to offer. This should not only be purchase and supply of books, but mainly provision of information; information which will assist teaching, learning and research of the customers. Line (1990) goes on to suggest that the vision for the new academic library as customer-based entity, concerned with and for its staff, efficient in the use of resources, imaginative in its use of technology, well-managed, visibly and demonstrably a first class service. It must not stand still, it should constantly be awake to new circumstances, need and opportunities, and it must be designed for continual flexibility.

Academic libraries have been dominated by print publications and access mechanisms which are 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. As universities compete for students, how well they are served in the library is equally important as well as how well they are taught. Academic Librarians both serve and teach by demonstrating effective searching, introducing new information sources, and helping people to frame queries. The academic library will not only serve but will also be deeply involved in teaching and education. It means both intensive and extensive training of users in techniques of data retrieval on the one hand, and involvement in distance learning and other new patterns of teaching and learning techniques on the other.

Blazej and Marzena (2005). went on to say that training its users will be one of the most important services of the user-oriented library, therefore teaching and training skills are essential for the librarian of the future, not to mention both library and IT skills - not only basic but also advanced and even super advanced.

Information literacy

The American Library Association (1989) defines information literacy as a set of abilities requiring individuals to “recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information”. Information literacy has increasingly become important in the contemporary environment of rapid technological change and proliferating information resources. Because of the escalating complexity of this environment, individuals are faced with diverse, abundant information choices—in their academic studies, in the workplace, and in their personal lives. Information is available through libraries, community resources, special interest organisations, media, and the Internet. Increasingly, information comes to individuals in unfiltered formats, raising questions about its authenticity, validity, and reliability. Information literacy is therefore important to assist academic library users evaluate and make effective use of information.

Nimon (2001) reported that information literacy has been a major concern of the library profession in Ghana over the past decade. With this economic rationalist world, where value must be seen to be returned for the investment of money and time, academic libraries must show that their resources and services are effective in aiding student learning and supporting the research activities of staff and students. Collaboration between library and academic staff fostering students’ information literacy has long been seen to be the most effective way to achieve this goal. Currently in Ghana there are only two universities (University of Cape Coast and University for Development Studies) which have added information literacy to their modules for first year students as a compulsory course. This is intended to help the majority of the students to be able to effectively access the resources in the library without much help from the library staff. In the UK and elsewhere, some academic institutions have information literacy as a semester course for first year students. Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology library has proposed that librarians teach information literacy

skills as a semester course for all first and third year students. This will mean that by the time they are through with this course, students would be able to access and fully use the resources provided by the library. This idea has proved to be a difficult one for the university authorities to embrace. Meanwhile, the one-day library orientation programme that KNUST and some of the universities in Ghana organise for fresh students is nothing to write home about. Students get to their final year and find it difficult accessing a simple library catalogue which is key to the holdings of the library.

Scholarly Information and Research

Academic libraries in Ghana one way or the other pay two or three times the cost price of a journal to access research articles, be it print or electronic. Unfortunately these libraries provide facilities for research but then have to buy from publishers, at exorbitant rates. Alternative solutions can be guild publishing, self-publishing and open access institutional repositories. These have become increasingly attractive from an economic point of view. From a scholarly communication standpoint, however, these new solutions may not simply replace the traditional journal publishing infrastructure. However, alternative models of scholarly publishing are in certain ways better aligned with the interest of libraries. The vision for academic libraries should include working actively to support open access to scholarly work and setting up open access institutional repositories which are interoperable. Open access (OA) scholarly literature is composed of free online copies of peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers as well as technical reports, theses and working papers. In most cases there is no licensing restriction on their use by readers. They can therefore be used for research, teaching and other purposes, thereby enhancing knowledge dissemination. Open access assists faculty and researchers to increase their impact and visibility and improves the research profile of the institution.

Ghanaian scholars would see OA as the fastest and easiest means for pushing their research results into the world. OA would fill scholarly journal gaps in libraries and through OA strong academic links (south-south and south –north) between researchers will be fostered.

Institutional Repositories (IR)

Scholarly communication initiatives could be an advocacy for setting up institutional and/or disciplinary repositories where an institution’s scholarly output can be accessed by all. According to Lynch (2003) “a university-based institutional repository (IR) is a set of services that a university offers to the members of its community for the management and dissemination of digital materials created by the institution and its community members. Institutional or digital repositories include, but are not limited to electronic theses and dissertations, faculty publications, university archival materials, conference proceedings, video of important university events, and digital materials in any other form important to the output of the university”. Currently there is no academic library in Ghana with exception of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) that has an open access institutional repository. This facility in KNUST has assisted in raising the image and web ranking of the university among the top African universities. Currently KNUST is at the 20th position in the whole of Africa (<http://www.webometrics.info/>). The IR showcases the research output of the institution to the whole world enabling quick and easy access. It is an effective means of sharing research information with the world, since it is mostly on free access and so institutions that have limited funding and cannot maintain library collection can also have access to critical information.

Research Activities among Librarians

Academic libraries have for centuries played important roles in supporting research in all subjects and disciplines within their host universities and colleges. According to Tooley and Darby (1998), whilst the major purpose of educational research may be to improve and inform practice, it carries a subsidiary carrier-related purpose for the academic community. Scholarly research can inform and support the teaching role of the academic institution in several ways. It can help Librarians to identify, conceptualise problems, activities and outcomes relating to the teaching and learning programmes of the institutions which they serve. Scholarly research can also provide common language and theoretical frameworks that can be used among librarians and faculty to discuss and analyse. Research can also provide data that can help describe and monitor educational concerns.

Professional staff of the University Libraries are accorded academic status. They have similar requirements for promotion and enjoy similar remuneration like the other academic staff in the faculties or research institutes. Academic assessment is based in general on research output, which is based in turn on publication. Research is part of the responsibilities of the academic staff of the University Library. This means that, in addition to pursuing professional library duties, they are required to engage in teaching, research and consultancy services.

Altbach and Lewis (1995), in their Carnegie Foundation funded international survey on the academic profession, concluded that it is difficult for someone to achieve tenure in an academic institution if he /she does not publish. However, the levels of research and publishing among academic librarians have been very minimal. Manda (1999) conducted a study on trends and patterns of research and publishing among librarians at the University of Dar es Salaam library and observed that the level of research output was very small. The rate of publication among librarians in Ghana is very low.

Almost all the state funded university libraries in Ghana do not have substantive Deputy University Librarians. This buttresses the fact there is the lack of interest and the skill in conducting research among librarians in Ghana since promotion to such a position is based on the number of publications one has produced.

Resource Sharing

The advent of information technology has led to an increase in the production, dissemination and access to the publishing output of scholarly resources. This ready availability of information and the rapid retrieval systems have raised library patrons' expectations, and changed their information seeking patterns. Academic and research libraries find it extremely impossible to own all that is published to meet the growing user needs as a result of their declining budget. These developments have led librarians to rethink of approaches to providing for the information needs of their clients' academic and research pursuits. Librarians are convinced that there has to be a paradigm shift from ownership to access, and a move towards greater reliance on external than on internal sources. In this regard, librarians are re-examining the concept of resource sharing as a viable means of providing access to relevant and current information for their users.

In spite of the inadequacies of university library collections, some African libraries traditionally did not have any form of resource sharing Badu (2004:99). This lack of sharing is confirmed by Adeogun (2005), and quoted by Raju and Raju (2009; p.57) who point out that many librarians in the public, state or academic libraries show no interest in resource sharing relationships.

Academic libraries could have strong resource sharing processes in a form of shared databases; sharing and exchange of staff; interlibrary loan and document delivery; cooperative cataloguing and acquisition; cooperative storage and finally shared expertise in answering reference questions. Alemna and Antwi (2002: 234) state that a firmly articulated policy and plan can then be put in place to govern these processes. Fenner and Fenner (2004) also hold the view that as costs of storage materials rise and storage space diminishes, resource-sharing and consortia-building will recapture the interest of librarians. There will be more dependence on resources shared across consortia, be they state-wide or smaller groupings of libraries. The greatest interest and most notable cost savings venture will be in physical storage of historical collections, and consortial purchases of expensive packages of digital resources. Sharing will involve all categories of resources; physical, digital, and human. Libraries will share the knowledge and expertise of specialists in esoteric subjects, in order to provide highly specialized research assistance.

Digital library has now become the trend, and has created a meta information community. Rather than piecemeal, an academic library should have an overall plan on how to manage the content it provides effectively and efficiently, how to partner with its allies, and how to distribute budget allocation. Evolving technology has changed the way libraries work and the way they provide services. In the UK, a student from one university can personally borrow or use the facilities of another university (consortium building); from one collection to distributed collections; from the catalogue interface to multiple interfaces (OPAC and Union Catalogue); from books and journals to information fields and streams encompassing traditional and non-traditional forms of scholarly communication. These include diverse forms and genre such as preprints, traditional publication, informal commentary, data sets, software applications, maps, video clips, and web pages-all accessible, in principle, anytime

and anywhere. With this, one would be able to access the holdings of any academic library in the country. Academic libraries in Ghana will need to move from a single library to a network of libraries. Currently the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Ghana - (CARLIGH) which is a group consisting of some academic and research libraries is focusing its efforts on bringing these libraries together to ensure the maximum use of resources and other facilities. Its vision is to be a centre of excellence in providing recorded knowledge in all formats, for teaching, learning and research activities in Ghana.

The mission of CARLIGH is to employ collective information resources, available technology, and staff capabilities to improve teaching, learning and research including lifelong learning, in member institutions and by extension in Ghana. CARLIGH has successfully negotiated licensing agreements for selected databases and e-journals for users of some academic and research institutes in Ghana including the universities, polytechnics, and research libraries, which have registered and pay annually their membership and subscription fees that is currently at GH¢500 (five hundred Ghana cedis) and \$4500 respectively.

Alemna and Antwi (2002: 234-235) in supporting “consortiaism” point out that increasingly consortium building is placing emphasis on computerised, multi-library networks involving shared databases, telecommunication links, and common applications. However in the case of Ghana, they need not all be computer-based as slight modification can be made to suit any particular situation. They go on to point out that currently there is a new focus on consortia building worldwide because of the following reasons: the quality of service will be enhanced, the cost of service is reduced and duplication of stock is minimised.

Digital Initiatives

A digital library can be defined as one where users access resources by electronic means and where information is delivered to users electronically Rosenberg (2006). Libraries digitise most of its book stock and journals as a way of preserving the intellectual heritage and knowledge which the library represents. With the advent of online data, there will be more digitised full-text resources in library collections, co-existing with hard copy. Both are needed, and a collection lacking either format will not serve clients adequately. Certain serendipitous discoveries made through shelf and print journal browsing would be impossible through Web browsing alone. Accessibility refers to the ease and speed by which digitised information can be located and retrieved, with or without assistance. The advantages of digital information over the printed form according to Line (1996) are as follows:

- digital materials can be sorted, transmitted and retrieved easily and quickly;
- digital texts can be linked, thus made interactive, besides enhancing the retrieval of more information (either texts, numbers, graphics, algorithms or statistics);
- access to electronic information is cheaper than its print counterpart when all the files are stored in an electronic warehouse with compatible facilities and equipment;
- Digitalisation means no new buildings are required, information sharing can be enhanced and redundancy of collections reduced.

In the light of the above advantages, it is natural to find more information being digitalised and uploaded onto the Internet to be correspondingly more globally accessible. Academic libraries in Ghana must begin to launch a variety of digital projects designed not only to increase access to the library's resources for the university community, but also a learning tool for librarians themselves.

According to Fenner and Fenner (2004), online information delivery is very effective for distance learners, but distance education must not be thought of only in terms of digital resources and the Internet. In the real world, knowledge is transmitted through discussion as much as by any other means. Simply giving information to a user, either in digital format or in hard copy does not give him or her understanding. The user may know the proper analytical techniques to apply but may miss the implications of the analysis because there is no opportunity for discussion. Indeed, with much Internet usage, collaborative learning is actually precluded. It is possible to create virtual communities and discussion groups, and librarians need to give attention to such possibilities when serving distant learners. Without attention to community building, heavy Internet use can create or exacerbate antisocial tendencies in people. Librarians serving remote users can provide opportunities for distant learners to work jointly, identify problems and make decisions co-operatively, in library-hosted chat rooms and occasionally in the library facility.

The New Academic Librarian

According to Blazej and Marzena (1999) the vision of the library of the future cannot be complete without the vision of the librarians of the future. Their knowledge and experience, characteristics and image will all in all decide the future of the library. The academic librarian of the future must be a researcher, counsellor, planner, manager, assessor, team member, problem-solver and computer-printer repairman. In other words, academic librarians in Ghana should have the strong need to collaborate closely not only as professionals but with partners in other areas of higher education and cognate fields. Their leadership must create a coherent environment for engaging with scholarly information in all its forms.

This opinion, shared by most experts, shows that the academic librarian of the future will be expected to be multi-skilled. His/her most important characteristics must be very good interpersonal and communication skills, language proficiency, team-working skills, user friendliness and customer orientation. In order to fulfil at least the above expectations and to work with no hope of a reasonable salary, the future academic librarian needs to really have a good sense of humour. Training its users will be one of the most important services of the user-oriented library. Therefore teaching and training skills are essential for the librarian of the future, not to mention both library and IT skills - not only basic but also advanced.

The professional expertise and interpersonal skills of librarians are invaluable in a world where information overload threatens to overwhelm and challenge education and life. Therefore, a focus on increasing the quality and quantity of interactions between academic librarians and their community is a positive way to approach the future of academic librarianship.

Flexible Experts/Specialists

Agyen-Gyasi (2008) quoted Smith (1974) defining the term subject librarian as an expert in the bibliographical organisation of a field of knowledge, and who utilises this expertise to provide complex and needed services to a clientele. In the academic/research library, these services include two or more of the following: collection development, skilled assistance in maximising 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 organisation and problems of his field, and a thorough understanding of library operations, including the limitations as well as the special capabilities they provide.

In an academic library, the responsibilities of a subject specialist reflect the subject and faculty structure of the given university. The subject librarian/specialist acts as a single point of contact between the library and faculty. This promotes a more detailed awareness of user needs and ensures that the library's collections are balanced and are in line with the interests of the users. Acquisition of library materials, for example, should be done by a team of subject librarians with different backgrounds in order to ensure a balanced collection Agyen-Gyasi, (2008).

The University of Ghana, Legon has the libraries of the Business School, Faculty of Law, and the Medical School at Korle-Bu arranged on what could be on subject lines. In addition, the libraries of the University for Development Studies, Centre for Development Studies at the University of Cape Coast and to some extent the University of Education, Winneba are arranged on subject lines. The establishment of the collegiate system at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology is gradually shifting the College Libraries towards subject lines. However, the librarians manning these libraries do not possess the relevant subject qualifications or experience for such disciplines, although it is a common practice in academic libraries in the U.K. and elsewhere.

The modern academic library in Ghana will need a team of flexible experts with a variety of aptitudes and specialisations who collaborate as researchers, managers, skilled technologists, and proactive in the fulfilment of the mission of their respective universities.

Skilled Technologists

The future academic libraries will largely be dictated by the properties of online data. Online data differ from their printed counterpart in many respects, but the one most relevant to academic library patrons is how it is accessed. With information available online, members of academic communities can increasingly work completely outside the walls of traditional

libraries. This serves a real need for patrons as they save time and simplify their lives by working from their homes or offices, while simultaneously helping librarians who are struggling to save space and money. These needs of the users would be best served with the help of librarians who are skilled technologists, designers of software and computer programmes which are tailored to aid information access. Currently the libraries in Ghana do not have such expertise. Computer scientists need to be encouraged to acquire library qualification and librarians without computer science background could also do the same. In a nutshell specialists with graduate degrees who are not qualified librarians should be hired for their technical or subject expertise, and will learn the library skills they need on the job.

Conclusion

Information development is dynamic and will never be static. There is information explosion today which requires the information professionals to come up with efficient and effective ways to process and retrieve information for its users. This invariably will bring a great positive change especially in ways of providing information services. Clearly, the vision for the future of academic libraries in Ghana must be to quickly move away from the old ways of providing services and adopt the technologies to organise and deliver information. Invariably information technology has allowed academic libraries in developed countries to provide services quicker, easier and cheaper that were not possible fifteen years ago. Troll (2001) admonishes that the future of academic libraries is at stake. We must now begin to understand how and why libraries and library use are changing if we want libraries to be positioned effectively in higher education a decade or decades from now.

Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, the following recommendations concerning the future of academic libraries in Ghana are made.

- The future academic librarian should be conversant with the current problems facing academic and research libraries such as changes in information sources from print to electronic; nature of students which includes part-time and distant learners; over 200 percent increase in student numbers; inflation in the cost of printed materials; growing numbers of academic publications; declining library budget; changes in teaching and learning methods and adopt strategies to address them.
- The rapid growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the advent of e-books, e-lecture notes, e-course work and tutorials and the Internet in general, have changed the way academic libraries operate today. These technologies require greater responsibility of the academic librarians in order to manage services, which offer the users a careful selected mix of varied information formats and media.
- One of the biggest challenges in creating digital libraries is the building of digital collections. There is therefore the need to have the requisite human and material resources for digitisation. Academic institutions should also set up their institutional repositories in order to showcase the research output of their institutions to the whole world.
- The Committee for University Librarians and their Deputies (CULD), CARLIGH and Ghana Library Association (GLA) should organise seminars and workshops to promote staff development. This could be in the form of internship programmes, in-

service training, short courses both locally and internationally, and exchange programmes which are woefully inadequate.

- CARLIGH should deepen or widen its network to cover all the private universities, colleges of education and polytechnics which are yet to benefit from its activities.
- Finally there should be fundamental changes in the management's perception of academic and research institutions towards their libraries.

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