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THE CHALLENGES OF MAINTAINING STANDARDS IN LAW LIBRARIES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine some specific areas of academic law libraries in Nigerian universities, taking cognizance of the approved minimum accreditation requirements by the National Universities Commission and Council of Legal Education. It highlights the challenges facing academic law libraries in Nigerian universities with regard to administration, collection development and staffing. Some suggestions are proffered on how to maintain standards. In conclusion, the paper identifies, inter alia, lack of commitment by the authorities of the universities as the most hindering factor in maintaining standards in academic law libraries in Nigerian universities.

Definition of Terms

Words are used in their ordinary meaning except where it is otherwise stated. However, law librarian in this paper refers to a professionally qualified librarian who is a lawyer. Academic law libraries are libraries in the Faculties of Law in Nigerian universities as well as the Nigerian Law Schools.

Standards

Ifebuzor (1994), states that the word, standard, is used in various series. Its meaning therefore varies in accordance with the context in which it is used. The primary idea which it expresses is that of a measure of quantity or quality which is fixed by some authority. Hence we have standard metre, standards behaviour, and standard sizes of various items.

Two important characteristics of standards are worth noting. In the first place, standard ought to be sanctified by authority, consensus and custom. Secondly, standards vary in degree. They may be either standards of adequacy or standards of excellence. The variety of standards depends on the social, economic and educational development of the country for which the standards are formulated. Thus, standards of adequacy in a developed country can be standards of excellence in a developing country.

Library Standards

Some definitions have been given for 'library standard'. Apparently, the most specific and distinct definition was put forward by the South African Library Association Sub-Committee on Public Library Standards, thus:

Library standards may be defined as the criteria by which library services may be measured and assessed. They are determined by professional librarians in order to attain and maintain the objectives they have set themselves. Standards maybe interpreted variously as the pattern of an ideal, a model procedure, a measure for appraisal, a stimulus for future development and improvement, and an instrument to assist decision and action not only by librarians themselves, but by laymen concerned indirectly with the institution, planning and administration of library services.

Introduction

The early law library in Nigeria sprang up in Lagos in the 19th century but I had an unpleasant beginning. There are some reasons for this, among which is, first and foremost, the nature of the study of law. According to Jegede (2001), "it was believed by the colonial government that law could only be taught effectively in Britain, its birth place, where it has its own distinct character and culture different from other disciplines". And so for a longtime starting with Sapara Williams who was enrolled in Gold Coast (Lagos being part of the Colony of Gold Coast) in 1880, all Nigerian lawyers received their legal training in Britain. Another reason was the very nature of legal practice up to the early part of 20th century, which was limited in scope. This was because Britain handled all foreign relations, international trade agreements and all treaties on behalf of government of Nigeria. Therefore, the needs of the lawyers then were modest.

Igwebuike (1997), however states that the first and oldest type of law library in Nigeria was the one-room library set up for small groups with distinct needs such as Magistrates and Judges in 1887. This library formed part of what is now known as High

Court of Lagos Library at Tafawa Balewa Square. The next early law library was established to serve the Federal Ministry of Justice, Lagos. In this very library, evidence is clearly visible to show that it was established in the 19th century. For instance, some of the books bore the accessioning date of 1806. The last sets were the legal practitioners' private law libraries. A classic example was that belonging to Sapara Williams (July 1855 - March 1915). He was said to have owned the finest and largest law library along the coast of West Africa.

All in all, the first academic law library in Nigeria came into being with the establishment of first indigenous university, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1960, when the first faculty of law was set up (Jegede 1994). Today, there are thirty-four federal, state and private universities which offer degree courses in law in Nigeria.

The emergence of many academic law libraries in Nigerian universities, no doubt, ushered in a number of challenges and problems, and most of them do find it a great task to maintain standards. Anaeme (2007), maintains that many of our universities set up Faculties of Law without making provisions for standard law libraries. They tend to merge the law libraries with that of the universities' main libraries. The Council of Legal Education mindful of the importance of standard law library, made it an important criterion that a faculty of law must have a distinct and separate standard law library for full accreditation of the law faculty. This is a very important criterion because technical management of law library is completely different from that of the university main library, as a result of the special nature of the collections. Moreover, a special classification scheme, Moys Classification and Thesaurus for Legal Materials, is used for law books in the academic law libraries.

Administration

The complexities of our society and our laws have made the administration of justice one of the most important features of our society. Law libraries are an effective tool for the administration of justice. Therefore, such an effective tool must be dynamic and responsive to change in the ever-changing socio-economic conditions of our country. Since academic law libraries serve would-be lawyers, it is therefore necessary to make them growing organisms as the role of law has become more important with time.

The prevailing circumstances in the Nigerian universities by which the law librarian could be likened to a manager who has very limited control of his office, as he owes allegiance to two masters, the university librarian as the overall head of all libraries in

the university and the Dean of Faculty of Law as his immediate boss, affects proper and effective administration of law library. In this regard, the administration/ organization of an academic law library has a salutary effect on its development and services.

In the United States of America, both the American Bar Association and the Association of American Law Schools set standards with emphasis that the law library is an integral part of the faculty of law rather than as an integral part of the university library system. The two bodies stress the need for some viable autonomy for the law library. They provide that the policy and budget of the law library should be determined by the Dean, the Law Librarian and the Faculty Board. This policy obtains in the United States of America.

However, in Nigeria, some writers have argued that the nation's universities are not yet ready for such decentralization along the lines specified by American standards. Here, we disagree. There is need to experiment such policy with a view to measuring its success or otherwise. It is a challenge to Nigerian universities. This is because successful law faculty library operations depend on forward-looking and realistic faculty-formulated objectives.

Another aspect of administration that demands attention is planning. The law librarian should initiate or take part in all planning and implementation of decisions that affect the law library. Such activities include the decisions to:

- i) Develop and administer the library budget.
- ii) Build a useful collection.
- iii) Participate in library and related information networks.
- iv) Co-ordinate implementation and upgrades of the library computer networks.
- v) Perform all administrative functions required of the law library.
- vi) Manage all other law library operations.

As earlier mentioned, the law library should have a separate and distinct budget. The law library budget should be maintained in the same way as separate budgets are maintained for laboratories and workshops of other faculties that use such facilities. The budget should be adequate to ensure a complete up-to-date collection including print, non-print and electronic resources. It should include but not limited to:

- i) Publications' costs, which include up-keep and subscription for both print and alternative formats such as access to online electronic services.

- ii) Supplies equipment and appropriate technologies.
- iii) Binding costs.
- iv) Resources sharing, including networking and online bibliographic utilities.
- v) Physical space and maintenance.
- vi) Membership in professional organization, training and travel expenses for law library staff.
- vii) Such other categories as may be defined by practice.

The Faculty Board should provide support throughout the fiscal year to ensure that the administration of the budget complies with its overall mission.

Collection Development

One of the most important objectives of any library, and law library in particular, is the provision of adequate and right resources at the right time to the clientele. Olanlokun and Salisu (2001), assert that the law librarian is required to display all his/her knowledge about law librarianship in the area of collections development. This is more so in Nigeria where there are numerous factors to be taken into consideration in selecting and acquiring materials both for present and future use.

The legal profession is unique, in that, unlike other professions, books are the primary tools of the lawyer's trade. Law is book intensive and thrives on conservation. Librarianship, on the other hand, is a profession associated with books and other information materials and whose motto is 'service to mankind'. The two professions are like twin sisters. Take away books, there will not be anything like a library. More so, a lawyer without a large collection of books and other legal materials might not be able to perform creditably.

It is obvious that no library can actually acquire all publications available in the world because of information explosion. Thanks to internet provisions for easily available information. As a university library has limitation of funds coupled with rising costs of books and other materials, selection has to be done by the law librarian. Every library has a mandate and the acquisition policy puts this into consideration so that the collection is developed to satisfy users in the particular mandate area.

The whole machinery of library operation, no doubt, is centred around sound resources. This is why the faculty of law librarian, one of whose duties should be the acquisition of law library materials, should co-operate with the university main library in such

professional matters as book selection (non legal books) and inter-library loans. A programme of cooperative acquisition should be worked out between the main library and faculty of law library. Materials required for inter-disciplinary areas should be left to the main library to acquire. Thus, a much stronger collection can be developed in the faculty of law library with minimum waste and duplication.

Staffing

The law librarian should have completely competent supporting staff. Staffing has been one of the main problems facing most academic law libraries in Nigeria. In addition to under-staffing in terms of numerical strength, they do not have reasonable qualified staff, though there have been improvements in recent times.

However, as many law libraries in Nigerian universities are now managed by professional librarians who are lawyers, there is need to employ law graduates or diploma holders in law without librarianship education as these can be used to the best advantage in reference sections. It needs to be noted that there is a limit to what law students can find materials usefully by thrashing about on their own in law libraries, and once that limit has been reached, they need to be guided by professional assistance. Where this is acknowledged, the public services staff in the law library will expand to the betterment of services provided.

Another area that calls for concern is the unhealthy low ratio of professional librarians to non professional staff, who are library assistants/attendants, in the academic law libraries. This creates practical administrative problems. The situation results in

- a low level efficiency of services provided;
- low rating of the services of the law library by the dean, other academic staff, and students of the law faculty, and
- the inability of the staff to shelve used law books/ materials properly.

As some academic law libraries have installed Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in their libraries, (being recommendation by the Council of Legal Education for accreditation of law faculties in Nigerian universities) while others are on the verge of installing them, universities should employ competent computer/internet operators for the law libraries. The emphasis in this 21st century is on e- library. Technology has changed the library catalogue into a visual bibliographic resource

allowing the library's staff and users to determine the availability of sources of information not only within the library but globally.

Suggestions

As prelude to maintaining standards, Nigerian universities should, among other things, fund their law libraries adequately. The universities often treat all academic units on par in allocation of funds. Consequently, some faculties of law have caricatures of law libraries, so poorly stocked that they cannot support teaching and research programmes even at first degree level. In most cases, a library does not hold complete sets of law reports and journals published in Nigeria. The same is true of Commonwealth legal materials which are invaluable for teaching and research.

There is need for an academic law library to have its own technical services attached to the law library, having a librarian/cataloguer incharge and under the law librarian as overall head. It makes for easier and quicker processing of law books and other materials for the law library.

Operations and services such as collection development, cataloguing and classification, serials, reference and circulation should be fully computerized. Nonetheless, many law libraries in Nigerian universities are making great efforts to automate their operations and services. This is a good development.

An academic law library should be organized in such a way to provide other services, which include, indexing and abstracting services, bibliographies and reading lists as well as photocopying services.

Indexing services are important in academic law libraries and should be provided to users to further the exploitation of periodical literature. Current articles that are relevant to clientele, which appear in law journals, non-legal journals, and newspapers purchased by the law libraries should be indexed. This helps the library staff to be able to quickly retrieve and deliver materials that are of interest to users. The importance of compiling indexes to the legal periodicals, law reports and reviews cannot be over-emphasized. Many of the current legal periodicals do not have comprehensive indexes, and there are some which do not have indexes at all apart from their table of contents. Law reports and their indexes are indispensable tools in the preparation of law cases.

Academic law libraries should emphasize on preparation of in-house abstracts. These should be specifically directed to the users' needs. They should be issued regularly and widely distributed among users in order to ensure the full exploitation of current serials.

Bibliographies should be compiled on topical issues as at the time of compilation. They may be compiled at the request of a law library user or as a means of focusing attention on any area of the law library collection. Reading lists are compiled at the request of a user on topic of his research or interest.

Lastly, photocopying services are important in academic law libraries due to high costs and scarcity of law books and materials. Copies have to be made for use by the interested users.

Conclusion

Academic law libraries in the country have been responsible for provision of information needs of both the law lecturers and students. In spite of the fact that the first academic law library came into being in Nigeria fifty years' ago and thrived as universities grew in strength, most of the law libraries could not boast of effective standards of administration and services, as investigations revealed. The reason may not be far-fetched. The law faculties are not autonomous in administration of the law libraries. The authorities of the universities do not show enough commitments to the law libraries. There is need for commitments to be translated into provision of adequate finance to maintain and sustain them. The academic law libraries of the future, in order to meet the information needs of their users, must have to make use of ICTs in their operations and services.

It is hoped that the National Universities Commission and Council of Legal Education will gear up more efforts in their accreditation system for academic law libraries. The primary objective of accreditation is a desire to ensure that both the law faculty academic staff and students have access to minimum relevant materials for teaching and research. This will enhance a uniformly acceptable level of scholarship in legal education.

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