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# PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES NEEDED BY LIBRARIANS IN COLLEGE OF EDUCATION LIBRARIES FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICE DELIVERY IN NIGERIA

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#### Abstract

The paper is an investigation into the professional skills/competencies needed by librarians in Colleges of Education libraries in seven Colleges of Education in the South East, Nigeria. It identifies ICT skills/competencies as the most essential competence areas needed by librarians in this category of libraries. It further sought to find out; the various ways librarians can improve their professional competencies, the factors that militate against librarians zeal to improve their competencies and the strategies by which librarians can surmount these obstacles. Data were collected through a self-designed questionnaire. Finally, the paper calls on the library administrators to place priority on improving the competencies of librarians under them.

#### Introduction

The real development of any nation is tied to many factors and one of such factors is the crucial role that library services play in its development. Fundamentally, the library has an active role in contributing to the community which include implementing ideas, opening up minds, regeneration of knowledge, releasing the yoke of imagination, creating the opportunity for man to think critically and independently and reinforcing the dynamics of progress. These are some of the responsibilities of libraries to the society. Nations are stronger than others because they have more and richer information. (Ugwu 2009: 2). These roles/responsibilities are expected of any modem library in this vast changing world occasioned by information explosion. The library stands out as a service enterprise and its ability to generate-(create), process and use/apply knowledge will be the hallmark of the new century. Professionals engaged in all these three primary tasks (generation, processing and use/application of knowledge) of the "knowledge cycle" will be required to play a more proactive role as equal

partners/collaborators with the scholars. (Gulati and Raina 2000). In the words of Alexander Feng, "the core role of Information specialist is changing from information gatekeepers to information gum. Specifically, these he in guiding the use and dissemination, and in translating information into knowledge. Gulati and Raina (2000) also describes the role of traditional librarianship as metamorphosing into librarianship to include the tasks of scanning, filtering, selecting, organizing and packaging the flood of information in keeping with their changing role from "gatekeepers" to gateways to "information".

The above roles/ responsibilities calls for a certain level of professional competence among the librarians especially in Colleges of Education libraries where most of the users irrespective of their levels of education come into the library with what Brooks in Eze (2004) referred to as "Anomalous State of Knowledge (ASK)" which describes a situation where a reader says "I don't know what I want, I will know it when I see it".

The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (2000) defines competence as "the ability to do something well" and competency as "a skill that one needs in a particular job or for a particular task". Zarifian (2001) describes the notion of competencies as "the search for accuracy, quick response, language skills and technology literacy". The development of these abilities, attitudes and competencies is essential to be part of a competitive information industry. Competencies have also been defined as the interplay of knowledge and understanding skills and attitudes required to do a job effectively from the point of view of both the performer and the observer. (Gulati and Raina 2000). The unique competencies of the librarian include in-depth knowledge of print and electronic information resources in management and information services that meet the strategic information needs of the individual or group being served. According to Gulati and Raina (2000), Library and Information Science professionals are experiencing the consequences of three major paradigm shifts. These include:

- 1. The transition from paper to electronic media as the dominant form of information dissemination, storage and retrieval.
- 2. Increasing demand accountability with focus on quality customer services, performance measurement, benchmarking and continuous improvement.
- 3. New forms of work organization such as end-user computing, work teams, downsizing, re-engineering, outsourcing etc is the result of the third shift.

The information seekers or library patrons in Nigerian Colleges of Education libraries are faced with an avalanche of problems in their bids to track down relevant information for their study, reference and research needs. These problems as identified by Ochogu (2009) include:

- 1. Lack of awareness of their information needs.
- 2. Inability to determine the nature and extent of their information needs.
- 3. Lack of knowledge to the existence of information structure established in modem societies that meet the citizen's information needs.
- 4. Lack of skills required to exploit the structures to meet individual and community needs.
- 5. Inability of the users to critically evaluate the information obtained for decision-making.

Also, in a survey conducted by Ferreira et al (2007), they found out that there was a clear lack of mastery of information and communication technologies by the librarians interviewed. According to them, cataloguing, classification and indexing which are traditional matters in the education of librarians have been changing. This, in essence calls for a paradigm shift in the level of competencies by the librarians especially in Colleges of Education libraries.

In the light of the foregoing, the American Library Association set up a task force on professional competencies among reference and information services librarians in 2003. The task force, RUSA Task Force on professional competencies identifies the following areas of competencies for the reference and user services librarians. These include: access, responsiveness, organization and design of services, critical thinking and analysis, knowledge base, environmental scanning, application of knowledge, dissemination of knowledge, active learning, marketing/informing, assessment, communication and outreach, evaluation, collaboration, relationship with users, relationship with colleagues, relationship within the profession, relation with users, relationship beyond the library and the profession, evaluation and assessment of resources and services, user needs, information services, information resources, service delivery, information interfaces, and information service providers. Having identified the areas of competencies needed by librarians, the next important considerations

would be to find out the media and the criteria for measuring the level of acquisition of these skills/ competencies. In this regard, Zarifian (2001) avers that,

A person is competent when he or she takes the initiative to solve a problem when challenged to do so and takes the responsibility for his or her decisions. Asking for help and cooperation on a particular task and having the ability to use personal social networks are important elements in defining an individual as competent. Improved education and training are necessary to assist individuals in developing the competencies they will need on the job. The concept of core competencies involves knowledge, which should be acquired through formal education and training, skills or abilities, which are acquired through practice; and attitudes, which involve emotional and social aspects.

Obviously, the 21st century librarian needs an in-depth knowledge of print and electronic information resources in management and information services to cope with the influx of information bearing materials in the library thus making it imperative that *he I she* becomes more committed to improving his/her skills/competencies. Commenting on the need to maintain professional skills and competences by librarians, Ezeani and Ekere (2009) noted that,

The advent of Internet has drastically changed the needs of the information society. This no doubt, has also affected the way work is performed by professionals. The major challenge facing library and information science (LIS) professionals is the need to maintain professional skills, increase skills knowledge base and develop new competencies. The LIS professionals are therefore expected to leave their comfort zone and make a paradigm shift, which inevitably will change the whole organizational culture.

The relevant questions are, what are these professional skills and how can today's librarians in Colleges of Education libraries develop new competencies for effective service delivery? The above questions are what necessitated this empirical work on identifying the professional competencies needed by librarians in Colleges of Education libraries in the South East, Nigeria.

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# **Purpose of Study**

The general purpose of this study is to determine the professional competencies needed by librarians in College libraries.

The specific objectives are;

- 1. To identify the professional skills/competencies needed by librarians in College libraries.
- 2. To identify the ways librarians in College libraries can improve their professional skills/competencies.
- 3. To identify the factors that militates against the efforts of librarians in College libraries to improve their professional competencies.
- 4. To determine strategies for improving librarians' skills/competencies.

# **Research Questions**

To carry out this investigation, the following research questions guided the study.

- 1. What are the professional skills/competencies needed by librarians in Nigerian Colleges of Education libraries?
- 2. What are the various ways librarians can improve their professional competencies?
- 3. What factors militate against librarian's ability to improve their professional competencies?
- 4. What are the strategies by which librarians can improve their professional competencies?

#### Method

The study is a case study. The target population consisted of 44 librarians in seven Colleges of Education in the South East, Nigeria namely: Federal College of Education, EhaAmufu (FCEE), Enugu State; FCE, Umunze (FCEU); Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe (NOCOEN); Enugu State College of Education (Technical), Enugu (ESCOEE); Alvan Ikoku College of Education (ALVAN), Owerri; Abia State College of Education, Arochukwu (ABSCOEA); and Ebonyi State College of Education, ikwo (EBSCOEI). Professional Competencies Questionnaire (PCQ) was formulated by the researchers and used for data collection. The administration and collection of the instrument were done on the spot to avoid complaint of misplacement by the respondents. This resulted in a 100% return, which was perhaps due to the smallness of

the population. Data collected for the study were presented in tables and analyzed using means. A four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) was used to elicit information from the 44 respondents that made up the population of this study.

Institution library	No. of librarians
FCEE	6
NOCOEN	7
FCEU	6
ALVAN	8
ABSCOEA	7
EBSCOEI	5
SCOEE	5
TOTAL	5

# Data analysis

## Research question 1

Research question I sought to find out the professional skills/competencies needed by librarians in the institutions under study.

**Table 2**Responses of librarians on the professional skills/competences needed in the discharge of their duties.

	FCEE	NOCOEN	FCEU	ALVAN	ABSCOEA	EBSCOE	ESCOE E	AVG	DECISION
Collection development skills	3.0	3.3	3.5	3.6	2.8	3.1	2.9	3.2	A
Collection processing skills	2.3	1.6	2.5	1.8	2.4	2.1	2.1	2.1	R
Information retrieval skills	2.4	2.0	1.8	2.2	2.3	1.6	2.6	2.1	R
User education skills	4.0	3.6	3.6	3.1	3.5	4.0	3.6	3.6	A
ICT competencies	4.0	4.0	3.8	4.0	3.8	4.0	4.0	3.9	A
CAS skills	3.5	3.1	3.6	3.0	2.9	3 2	3.2	3.2	A
SDI skills	3.3	3.5	3.1	3.6	2.7	2.9	2.2	3.0	A
Indexing and abstracting skills	3.6	3.2	2.9	2.4	2.8	1.9	2.6	2.8	A
Reference and information services skills	3.8	3.3	3.2	2.7	3.0	2.8	2.5	3.0	A
Information literacy skills	2.7	2.9	2.6	3.0	2.8	2.5	2.7	2.7	A
Information repackaging skills	2.9	3.0	2.7	2.2	2.3	22	2.4	2.5	A
Cataloguing and classification skills	3.7	3.8	3.2	2.9	2.7	3.5	3.6	3.3	A
Bibliographic control	2.9	33	3.2	2.6	2.8	2.6	2.8	2.9	A
Interpersonal and Skills	2.4	2.1	1.9	2.3	2.7	2.3	2.3	23	R

Key to abbreviations: A-Agree; R-Reject; X-Mean score.

Table 2 above shows the responses of librarians on the professional skills/competencies needed. It is evident that most of the librarians in the institutions studied need professional skills/competencies in eleven out of the fourteen skills/competence areas listed. From the table, ICT skills/competencies ranked highest having scored 3.9 on the average. This is closely followed by user education/cataloguing and classification skills, which scored 3.6. Other skills/competence areas that ranked relatively high include development skills (3.2), current awareness services skills (3.2).

SDI skills and reference and information services skills both scored 3.0. Collection process skills, information retrieval skill and interpersonal and communication skills all scored less than 2.5 hence, were rejected since they did not score up to the criterion mean of 2.5.

## Research question 2

Research question 2 sought to find out the various ways librarians improve their professional skills/competencies.

**Table 3**Research question 2 sought to find out the various ways librarians improve their professional skills/competencies.

	FCEE	NOCOEN	FCEU	ALVAN	ABSCOEA	EBSCOE	ESCOEE	AVG	DECISION
	Χ	X	Χ	Χ	Χ	Χ	X	Χ	
Enrolling regular									
programmes	2.1	1.8	2.2	1.5	1.0	1.5	2.2	1.8	R
Enroling									
sandwich									
programmes	2.6	2.4	2.8	2.2	2.0	1.8	2.2	2.3	R
Through seminars,									
conferences & workshops	3.7	3.4	3.6	3.4	3.8	4.0	3.7	3.7	A
Self effort	3.0	3.6	2.8	2.7	3.4	3.0	2.8	3.0	A
Applying for study leave	2.3	1.8	2.2	1.8	2.0	2.7	2.1	2.1	R
Applying for									
part-time									
programmes	3.5	3.6	3.2	3.8	3.0	2.9	3.5	3.4	A

Table 3 above indicates that librarians time programmes, self-effort and by in the seven institutions under study attending seminars, conferences and improve their professional workshops. The least method of competencies mostly through partimproving their skills/competencies is through regular programmes. Sandwish

programmes and study leaves also scored less than the criterion mean of 2.5 and hence were rejected as possible means of improvement of skills and competencies.

# Research question 3

Research question 3 sought to find out the factors that militate the efforts of the librarians to improve their professional skills/competencies.

**Table 4**Responses of librarians on the factors that impinge on their efforts to improve their professional skills/competencies.

,									
	FCEE	NOCOEN	FCEU	ALVAN	ABSCOEA	EBSCOE	ESCOEE	AVG	DECISION
	Χ	X	Χ	X	Χ	X	X	Χ	
Bureaucratic									
Bottlenecks	3.2	2.8	2.6	2.8	3.2	3.0	3.2	3.0	A
Lack of fund	3.8	3.5	3.8	3.0	2.9	3.2	2.8	3.3	A
Apathy among staff	2.6	2.8	3.0	3.2	2.8	2.4	3.0	2.8	A
Insufficient administrative commitment	3.4	3.0	3.1	2.7	2.8	2.3	2.3	2.8	A
Lack of opportunity to apply new learning on					2.0			2.3	R
Inadequate training of trainers		2.2	2.1	2.3	2.5	2.6	2.3	2.3	R
The time involved	2.6	2.7	2.8	2.3	2.1	2.0	2.6	2.4	R

Table 4 indicates the lack of fund is the greatest obstacle that militates against librarians' effort to improve their professional skills/competencies. This is closely followed by bureaucratic bottleneck that stated 3.0, and apathic attitude among staff which scored 2.8 and insufficient administrative commitment that also scored 2.8. Lack of opportunity to apply new learning, inadequate training of trainers and staff time involved were all rejected having scored 2.3, 2.3 and 2.4 respectively.

## Research question 4

Research question 4 sought to find out the strategies for improving on librarians' professional competencies.

**Table 5**Responses of librarians on the strategies for improving their professional skills/competencies.

	FCEE	NOCOEN	FCEU	ALVAN	ABSCOEA	EBSCOE	ESCOEE	AVG	DECISION
	Χ	X	Χ	X	Χ	Χ	Χ	X	
Allocating more fund for skills dev.	3.4	3.1	3.6	2.9	3.3	3.6	3.8	3.4	A
Ensuring transparency	2.8	3.0	2.6	3.2	3.2	2.7	2.4	2.8	A
Forming a committee on skills dev.	2.5	2.7	2.4	3.1	2.8	2.7	2.6	2.7	A

Table 5 is indicative of the fact that allocating more funds for skills development is viewed by librarians as the most effective way to improve their skills/competencies. The librarians also indicated that the library management should ensure that the process of skills development should be transparent and hence, suggested that a committee should be set for better performance. All the items scored above the criterion mean of 2.5 hence were all accepted.

#### Discussion

The result of this study has shown the spate of interest of the librarians' skill/ competency development. It is however, closely followed by user education, which is, quite surprising considering the current desire/push for ICT competencies in almost every field of endeavour. Scholars such as Nwachukwu (2007), Ogbonna (2003), Mole (2006) and, Ugwuanyi and Eze (2009) share with this view of making ICT competencies a priority in the present information age. Also, Ejimofor (2003) averred that most librarians, especially the older ones had their professional training in the basic rudiments of traditional librarianship without any preparation or training to cope with the demands of information technology. She further recommended a training programme in ICT to enable them cope with current developments in the field. The librarians are always engaged in user education through formal and informal means. Hence, it is ranked second after ICT. Collection development is another very important aspect of librarianship, which demands high level of competencies for effective service delivery. It scored 3.2 alongside current awareness services- another important area demanding high level of competencies. It is however not surprising that information retrieval skill scored 2.1 since it is usually a job mostly performed by library assistants/attendants.

The result of research question 2 is indicative of the fact that librarians in College libraries mostly improve their professional skills/competencies through seminars, conferences and workshops. This item scored as high as 3.7 indicating a very high score. Also, enrolling in part-time programmes scored as high as 3.4. This also is not surprising since it is an acceptable means by which civil servants improve on their credentials. Self-effort scored as high as 3.0 and conversely study leaves, an acceptable means of skills development scored as low as 2.1. This result indicates that since it is not easy to obtain study leaves, the librarians usually engage in professional development through self-effort. Attending regular and sandwich programmes each scored less than 2.5 and hence, were rejected. Their low scores were not surprising since civil service rules forbid regular programmes for civil servants on paid- up jobs. Also, most library schools do not offer sandwich programmes for US courses.

Funding is paramount in most human endeavours. Professional skills/competencies can be better improved if there is adequate funding. The dwindling budget faced by most libraries has always posed a serious challenge in attempts to develop professional skills/competencies. Ugwuanyi and Eze (2009) made this point clearer when they stated "one major problem college libraries face ... is dwindling budget". It is therefore, not a surprise that lack of fund ranked highest (3.3) in the array of problems that militate against efforts made by librarians to improve their professional competencies (as indicated in table 3).

Bureaucratic bottlenecks scored 3.0 implying that it is a very serious factor that needs to be relaxed to enable librarians improve their professional skills/competencies. Lack of opportunity to apply new learning/skill and inadequate training of trainers both scored 2.3 hence were rejected as not posing serious threats on professional development of skills/competencies.

With lack of fund scoring as high as an average of 3.3 in table 3, it is not surprising that allocating more fund for skills development as a strategy for improving librarians' professional competencies (as evidenced on table 4) scored as high as 3.4. It indicates that when more funds is allocated, transparency ensured, and a committee on skills development is put in place, librarians in Colleges of Education libraries will have greater opportunities to improve on their professional skills/competencies.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

Two of the mandates of college libraries in Nigeria are; to ensure that the resources and facilities provided are maximally used through proper organization and dissemination and, to give qualitative reference and information services for study, teaching and research needs of the college community (NCCE, 1994). In order to meet with these mandates, it is expected that librarians in college libraries should ensure the development of their professional skills/competencies. Apart from self-effort, college libraries administrations should place top priorities on skills development of librarians in their libraries.

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