



**SKILLS REQUIRED IN MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF ACADEMIC
LIBRARY SERVICES DELIVERY DURING AND POST COVID-19**

By

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Abstract

The outbreak of corona virus in China in 2019 and its spread across the countries of the world has amplified the needs for academic libraries to develop capacity for improved service provision. This conceptual paper, which is based on qualitative review of literature, examines the impact of COVID-19 on academic libraries, the skills needed by academic librarians and library patrons in overcoming the challenges brought by COVID-19 to academic library services. The paper concludes that with uncertainty at the centre of this new reality, risk assessment and contingency planning should continue to feature high in the planning agenda of academic libraries. Emphasis should be placed on the training and retraining of academic librarians to acquire skills that will enable them to continue to be relevant during and after COVID-19.

Keywords: Skills, Academic libraries, COVID-19, Academic librarians, Library patrons

Introduction

The outbreak of a new strain of coronavirus known as COVID-19 in the city of Wuhan, China in 2019 and the resultant effects have brought a lot of challenges to humanity. These challenges are not limited to developing countries like Nigeria. Commenting on the challenges in America, Brown (2020) states that libraries serve as learning and connection centres for different categories of people and as such, the crisis of COVID-19 has challenged librarians to work creatively. A library is a place for acquisition, organisation, storage and dissemination of information in whatever format. According to Ezema, Ugwuanyi and Ugwu (2014), a library serves as a link between users and information that have been created.

Libraries are categorised based on the type of information they hold and their targeted users. Hence, we have school libraries-primary and secondary school libraries, public libraries – libraries for every member of a community, academic libraries – libraries of post-secondary school institutions such as universities, polytechnics and colleges of education. Librarians are professionally trained

Individuals responsible for the care of a library and its contents, including the selection, processing and organization of materials and the dissemination of information, instruction, and loan services to meet the needs of its users (Robin, 2004). Before covid-19 outbreak, the need for libraries, most especially in Nigeria, to up their games in meeting the demands of 21st Century brought about by information and communication technology has been in the front burner in meetings of librarians. The outbreak of COVID-19 has amplified this need. To address this need, the interventions of academic librarians for example may include, bridging the digital divide, addressing learning loss, aiding job seekers and increasing contribution to campus and community recovery and resilience.

There cannot be a library without users of its resources. Users or patrons of libraries, for example academic libraries are the faculty members, students and other categories of workers within that academic community. These users must surmount some challenges to be able to maximise the use of libraries in the era of COVID-19. The major challenges of library users are in two folds; lack of awareness about resources in the library and lack of best strategies for retrieval of information available in the library.

A major challenge of librarians before the outbreak of COVID-19 is lack of adequate and appropriate recognition within their communities. Librarians are also finding it hard to make library patrons see libraries as the primary source of their information needs. The development of internet in this new millennium with search engines such as Google and Yahoo returning results for natural language search terms has challenged libraries as main sources of information. Another challenge of librarians is how to make information available to users whose majority are increasingly becoming digital natives.

Oxford Advance Dictionary defines skill as the capacity or technique to do something well. Skills are usually acquired or learned. Librarians and libraries users need skills to be able to overcome the various challenges in the process of delivering or accessing library services during and post COVID-19. This paper therefore discusses skills required in meeting the challenges of academic library services delivery during and post COVID-19 era.

New Normal and Academic Libraries

The compulsory adjustments forced on almost all facets of human endeavours by the outbreak of covid-19 have not spared libraries and librarianship. Public spaces were shutdown and as a result, access to the physical walls of libraries was impossible. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unpredictable situation for many academic libraries across the globe, as digital transmission of information, and blended or hybrid provision (drawing on both physical library resources and electronic information resources) have now become rapidly the new reality in academic libraries, based on the anticipation, that, at least for the near future, fewer Library users are likely to enter into the four walls of a library.

Naturally, the rapid, disaster-facing situation created by the pandemic has forced academic libraries to make short-term changes with an emphasis on overcoming what has been considered to be a temporal situation, which will be reverted once social distancing rules are no longer in place and ‘normality’ is returned to our institutions (Martzoukou, 2021). Emphasis, in that way, has been mostly placed on surviving the present crisis and, often, putting in place short-lived or ephemeral plans, which can be easily changeable, depending on the day- to-day restrictions and additional social distancing regulations, imposed by governments, in an effort to control the pandemic.

However, the present crisis has already created radical shifts for academic libraries, some of which, under normal circumstances, would have taken years to materialize. Delay in the past was due to logistic, operational or bureaucratic hurdles, or simply because of a managerial or higher-level strategic resistance to ‘new ways of thinking’, which could have challenged established traditional library practices and tested-out formulas, creating, in that way, prolonged change management timelines (Corral & Jolly, 2019). Of course, even predating the COVID-19 situation, there was already a high adoption of technology and online tools usage in academic library practices and collaborative activities across universities (Ogungbeni, Adeleke & Opele, 2014). For example, when the global pandemic hit, the provision of online library services such as mobile technology-based library services were not a new undiscovered territory for academic libraries across the globe, that had already been developing significant pockets of expertise on the use of diverse online technologies and the provision of a range of online resources and activities. In relation to online education, the building stones for planning a sustainable cohesive, independent and robust strategy for dealing with the pandemic may have already been in place for some academic libraries that have endorsed before outbreak of corona virus, the vision of a

changing digital education reality, which emerged much earlier than the global pandemic crisis.

According to Williams (2020), relying solely on remote tools and online technologies to roll out processes creates, by default, management challenges around how to help library users swiftly and effectively transition from regular physical presence within the building of the library to online and blended access to library resources, in a way that requires minimal attendance in the library. Undoubtedly, this type of new online services rebranded and delivery poses many additional questions, related to the above, such as ‘are all the students able to access synchronously online library resources and overcome engagement equity barriers in online participation?’ Even when practical issues, that deal with accessibility or the use of technology (e.g. what applications to use) are tackled, it can be challenging for both library patrons and academic librarians with limited or no prior experience of provision of online services to deal with these changes.

Skills required to mitigate the Challenges faced by Librarians in Service Provision

In an uncertain situation like COVID-19, strong leadership skills among librarians are vital to illuminate the path forward. While much of the literature focuses on crisis management, other researchers and business consultants have emphasised the importance of leadership skill in addition to other professional skills to build and sustain a competent workforce during and post COVID-19 (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2020). The starting point for academic libraries therefore, is for managers of libraries to take responsibility in galvanising the workforce to be innovative and creative in academic library services provision. The focus of academic libraries no doubt should be more on digital electronic services provision. Digital competences encompass not only information and communication tools and technology related skills but also attitudes and behaviour that relates to the online information and communication environment, which address responsible, ethical and safe use and dissemination of information, as well as developing creative and innovative approaches when using digital media for learning, work, and everyday life. (Carretero, Vuorikari & Punic, 2017; Laurillard, Derrick, & Doel, 2016).

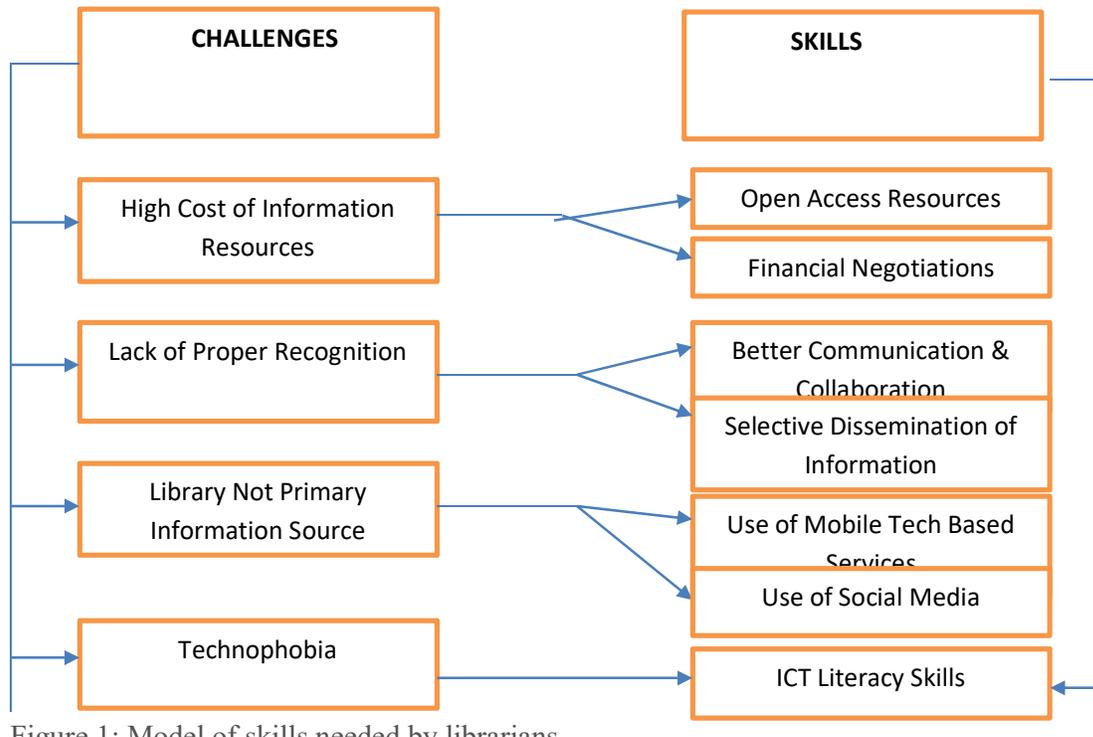


Figure 1: Model of skills needed by librarians

The model displayed in Figure 1 shows the skills required by academic librarians in solving some of the problems associated with their professional responsibilities to library patrons in the era of pandemic. One important skill needed by academic librarians is ability to source for Open Access resources. In response to the measures that were placed in universities during to the COVID-19 outbreak, there was a proliferation of publishers/suppliers, who offered on a temporal (some permanent) basis, increased or free access to resources for supporting students and academics with online teaching, beyond their normal offerings (a few indicative examples include Bloomsbury Professional, EDP Sciences Journals, JSTOR public health journals, Microbiology Society, Pharmacy Knowledge, ScienceDirect eBooks, University of Michigan Press eBooks, and vLex Justis among others) (Robert Gordon University Library, 2020). For instance, as a response to the pandemic and the need for public health information, JSTOR made available 26 public health journals, for free access covering topics such as epidemiology, health policy, occupational and environmental Health and health promotion (JSTOR, 2020).

Elsevier temporarily opened up access to over 250 textbooks for universities that subscribe to ScienceDirect (Elsevier, 2020). Moving beyond the pandemic academic libraries are called to advocate for the rights of open access for their students and staff. Again, even before COVID-19, academic librarians were well placed to provide guidance and institutional

support to academic researchers publishing via open access. Academic libraries, most especially in developing countries, don't usually get a fair share of the financial resources available to their institutions. According to Mamman and Nwokedi (2019), misplacement of priorities and lack of appreciation for the services rendered by the library are some of the reasons why managements of academic institutions don't allocate proper funds to their libraries. Librarians must develop skills for better financial negotiations with management of their intuitions. Negotiation should not be stopped during budget defense but extended to seeing that appropriate funds are allocated during every stage of budget implementation. Another challenge academic librarians' face within their community is lack of proper recognition by their counterparts in the faculties. While the vice-chancellor of a university is directly involved in the appointments of Heads of Departments in various faculties of a university in Nigeria, the Heads of Departments in the library are chosen by the University Librarian (Ajidahun, 2021). The implication of this is that the Heads of Departments in the library are often sidelined when perks of office of Head of Department are shared to those in the faculties. Collaborative skills with academics in the various faculties are needed by librarians in the area of acquisition of information resources for the various programmes of the institution and in the area of research. Academic librarians need to acquire more skills in the area of selective dissemination of information, most especially digitized information, to both staff and students of their institution.

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, academic libraries have been developing strategies to take full advantage of the Internet. The advent of the Internet brought a lot of changes to the operations of academic libraries such that the Internet was seen by some stakeholders in the business of information resources provision as competing with the library (Haliso & Ogungbeni, 2014). Academic librarians require competent skills in the deployment of mobile technology-based library services and use of social media in provision of library services.

According to Ogungbeni and Nwosu (2021), academic libraries must take library services to their patrons, who are increasingly becoming digital natives, using mobile technology-based services, if they are to remain relevant in this Information Age. This is to ensure that more members of the academic community see the library and not the internet as their main source of information. Academic librarians who are experiencing technophobia need to increase their information and communication technology skills to have enough confidence in using technology for library services provision.

Skills Required by Patrons for Effective Use of Library Resources

The COVID-19 pandemic stressed even more the important role of academic librarians in helping library patrons to develop information, digital and media literacy skills so that they can be in a position to independently select, access and use accurate, reliable, trustworthy and credible sources of information, not only for their studies but also for their own wellbeing. During COVID-19 the surge of circulating false claims and information online via social media and fake news, made it equally difficult for students to decipher misinformation/disinformation from accurate and reliable information.

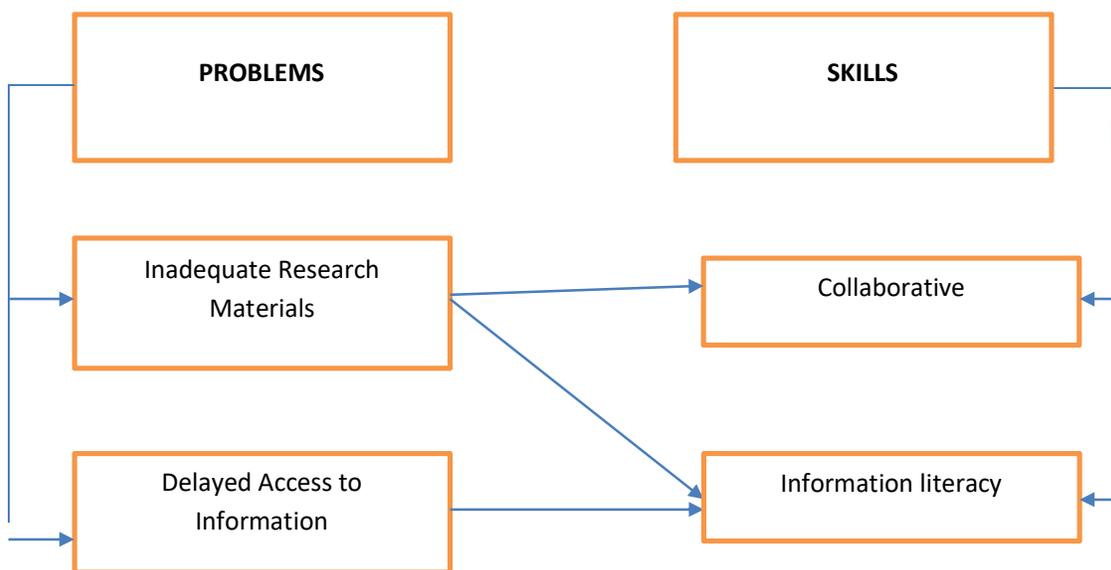


Figure 2. Model of Skills needed by academic library patrons

From Figure2, academic library patrons, most especially lecturers and researchers, need collaborative skills to maximize the benefits of library resources and services. When those in faculties do inter-faculties collaboration with other researchers and with academic librarians, they are likely to be exposed to more information resources that will be useful for their research activities. All the patrons of academic library need adequate information literacy skills not only to overcome the problem of inadequate information resources for their research, but to address the problem of how access information resources timeously.

Conclusion

It would seem that the knowledge and skills required for academic librarians to effectively and efficiently practice in a digital era academic library are a blend of discipline-specific knowledge, generic skills and personal competences. Academic librarians in developing countries, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, are also being challenged by new and emerging skills requirements. Many of the latter are a re-branding of traditional LIS skills using new technologies and hence it is important for the new generation academic librarians to use this knowledge base to adapt existing skills to respond to new 'problems' in a working environment that is constantly changing. Therefore, there is need to train and re-train academic librarians to improve their skills to make academic libraries to continue to be relevant during and post COVID-19.

From a managerial perspective, reviewing what existing connectivity gaps, support mechanisms and training needs may be present in academic libraries, in light of this 'new normal' caused by the pandemic, has been and continues to be a key element in assisting the smooth transition to remotely working and learning. In addition, in these efforts academic libraries are called to not just implement temporal changes. There is an opportunity to be changing agents by means of engaging synergistically and proactively with schools, research services, IT support, individual educators and students, learning/ teaching support professionals as well as with the wider body of academic librarians working in different academic settings. Engaging in critical discussions and creative collaboration will ensure that academic librarians do not only just better understand current needs but also predict and design for emerging trends and future needs following the most efficient and effective strategies for smoothly migrating to a new post COVID-19 era.

Furthermore, with uncertainty at the center of this new reality, risk assessment and contingency planning should continue to feature high the planning agenda of academic libraries, with restrictions placed to the physical access and with changing requirements for social distancing which may render some academic libraries to operate solely online for a longer period, supporting students and staff remotely, while others may give priority to blended learning provision with hybrid presence of campus and online services. Moving on, academic libraries require clear operation plans for online provision but also for the safety measures and logistics that will allow the smooth operation of blended learning, keeping both staff and students safe, and addressing measures for monitoring the number of library staff present on-campus, ensuring social distancing of staff and students who visit the library and

replacing physical meetings with online meetings. Clear processes are also needed for the sanitation and disinfection of books and other resources, keeping on the monitoring of research on how materials should be handled to mitigate risk of exposure to the virus.

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