

Quick Service Collection in University Libraries: Management and Problems

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Other methods of making the few available books accessible to a majority of users have to be devised due to the scarcity and high cost of books. One method is the introduction of a quick service collection. In this paper, the author examines

the quick service collections in Delta and Edo State Universities in Nigeria from their inception to the present time. Their management and the problems arising from them are also considered. Some solutions are offered for consideration.

Introduction

Odini (1997) and Rogers and Weber (1971) have variously described quick service collections as reserve collections and short loan collections. The materials in the quick service collection are those heavily used items that undergraduates require for their assigned reading, term papers and projects. The impact of this type of collection has become so significant, especially in third world countries, that it has attracted the attention of librarians and information scientists.

In this paper, the author traces the historical development of the quick service collection and describes its management and concomitant problems. An attempt will also be made to offer solutions to the problems. Delta and Edo State University Libraries, both in Nigeria, provided the data and institutional settings for this paper.

Genesis of the quick service collections

Delta State University has gone through various stages of metamorphosis. Established as Abraka Teachers' College in 1969, it was upgraded to a College of Education in 1970. Thereafter, in 1985, it became a campus of the then Bendel State University, Ekpoma. The purpose of the merger was

to phase out the N.C.E. (National Certificate of Education) programme and produce graduate teachers (Unomah 1986).

The creation of Delta State from the former Bendel State during the State creation in August 1991 triggered off a spirited agitation for the establishment of their own University by the education-hungry Deltans. Thus, the Delta State University came into being in April 1992

The library holdings at the Delta State University include books acquired during the College of Education days, as a Campus of the then Bendel State University as well as those acquired since becoming a full fledged University. These holdings comprise about 60,000 books (volumes) and 183 irregular journal titles. The library has a seating capacity for about 780 students at a time.

The library's quick service collection is housed in the Reserve Book Unit in the north wing on the first floor of the library building. It started in 1981 as a small collection behind the circulation desk. Its origin can be traced to recommendations by lecturers and requests by students for some heavily used books, which had either disappeared from the shelves or were textbooks introduced by lecturers for the teaching of certain courses. On the basis of their observations, librarians also withdrew from the open access shelves titles that

were repeatedly asked for by students. All such titles were withdrawn from the open access shelves while those not available were acquired and put on shelves behind the circulation desk for short loans within the library.

By 1985 the collection had grown considerably and there arose the need to relocate it. This led to the creation of the present unit. It this time also, students' projects which were formerly housed in the Serials Section of the library were moved to the unit. Thus, the present quick service collection of the Delta State University Library comprises final year students' projects, expensive textbooks, rare books, and high-demand books recommended by the library staff. Currently, the collection consists of 1,394 books and 5,242 projects. This unit has a seating capacity for about 56 readers at a time.

By way of contrast, Edo (formerly Bendel) State University was established in 1981. However, its library did not become fully operational until 1983. The library currently has a collection of 55,317 and seating capacity for about 300 readers.

The quick service collection at Edo State University Library started in 1987 also as a one-shelf collection behind the circulation desk. The collection comprises rare and out-of-print materials which are mainly donations by private individuals, high-demand books, titles recommended by the University Librarian and the Readers' Services Librarian and titles suggested by lecturers and Heads of Department. Sometimes lecturers loan from their private collections to the library for their students' use. Currently, the collection of over 2,000 titles is housed in a wing of the library. There is seating provision for about 44 readers at a time.

Management of the collections

In organising the University Library collection for use, one has a number of options. One option is an undergraduate reference collection. This normally comprises multiple copies of basic texts in a separate room within the library with seating facilities. Another option is to have a reserve book collection in which undergraduate texts and recommended reading lists are all kept together in a strictly controlled area. They may be borrowed for a limited period of time.

By using the velocity of circulation to measure the use of books, a librarian could determine the percentage of the collection in heavy use and the titles that are in high demand in the different subject areas. These findings can assist in taking the decision to establish a quick service collection within the main library of the university. This is followed by limiting loan periods to a few hours rather than days or weeks. This has the effect of increasing the amount of use of limited resources and of reducing the number of multiple copies required. The quick service collections in both Edo and Delta State University libraries are in theory open to all the registered users of both libraries. But in practice, the non-graduate clientele patronises the collections more. This class of users includes a) the undergraduate students who are pursuing four-year courses of studies leading to first academic degrees; b) two-year diploma students; and c) one-year certificate students.

All these are students who have no need for advanced library materials such as journals, documents and other special materials: they can successfully complete their university career by relying on quick service collections. Since all Nigerian universities are predominantly undergraduate institutions, the above three categories of users usually constitute about 90 percent of the student population in any Nigerian university. As there is generally a separate research collection, the graduate students and the faculty members do not use this service. The only connection that the faculty members have with the quick service collections is by referring their students to specific titles. As soon as the teaching of a course terminates at the end of a semester, the faculty members advise the university librarian to return titles that had been used for that course in the quick service collection to be returned to the open access shelves.

The importance of the quick service collection cannot be overemphasised. The boom years for Nigerian university libraries were between 1960 and 1980. During this period, undergraduates who were given assignments simply walked into the libraries to search for materials for the assignments. Almost invariably, they had more than they actually wanted. But after 1980, the phenomenal increases in student population began to constitute an issue. Although the National

Universities Commission has prescribed an annual growth rate of 2.5% for first generation universities; 5% for second-generation universities and 10% for third generation universities, these percentages are always far exceeded. But there is usually no corresponding increase in library materials. Consequently, Sam Ifidon (1999) observed that there were some Nigerian universities with as low as two books and 0.07 periodical title per user. This corroborated a World Bank study that was earlier on commissioned in 1992. Ironically, while the student population is increasing, the level of financial support is falling. Above all, the Nigerian book publishing output is very low – about 2316 titles in 1992 according to the *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook (1995)*.

The outcome of these negative developments is an acute book famine. The ready and perhaps only option that has occurred to library management is a policy decision on quick service collections. The collections are assembled and rules and regulations for their use formulated. As has been pointed out, the quick service collections are mainly for non-graduate students. The student uses each title on a two-hour basis. At the end of that period, the short loan can be renewed for another period of two hours unless another student is waiting for it. To avoid abuses some policy decisions are also made. For example, if a student deliberately retains a title beyond the short loan period, a fine is imposed. When the borrowed title is eventually returned, it is checked thoroughly to ensure that it has not been mutilated. If it has been mutilated, the culprit is either suspended from the library or fined five times the current price of the book or even both. Such severe penalties serve as deterrents to other would-be offenders.

In developed countries, the goal that the quick service collections serve can be met by other means. But in Nigeria, the only real alternative is liberal photocopying policies. However, photocopying raises other problems such as the violation of copyright laws when whole books are photocopied, maintenance and repairs of photocopying machines, subsidy for the cost of the service, the need for additional staff to operate the service and so on. At least one Nigerian university library is has converted all its collections into reserve collections. This means that the library is non-circulating, a sixteenth-century

phenomenon. This should certainly not be encouraged in whatever circumstance. Efforts should be geared towards availability and accessibility, not further restriction.

Problems of management quick service collections

As should be expected, several problems emerge in the process of managing quick service collections. The following are some of them.

Work load

As a result of the special nature of the collection and pressure from users, workers in the unit are usually over-worked. Since the materials are on closed access, staff must locate and retrieve every item requested by the readers. The staff is usually on their feet the whole working period. This is more so during the periods of examinations, term papers and project preparation. During vacation most sections of the library are empty. This is not so in the quick service collection unit. This is especially so at the Delta State University where the collection incorporates projects that final-year students make use of during vacation. The staff posted to this unit are never happy, especially the lazy ones. They see such postings as punitive and they do all they can to refuse being posted there.

Inadequate space

A second problem encountered in the management of the quick service collection is space. Both the reading and stack areas are too small to accommodate readers as well as books. The origin of this problem is the fact that plans were not originally made for the collections in both university libraries. This is obvious from the historical background given earlier in this paper: both collections started as one-shelf collections behind the circulation desks. Arising from this problem is the practice whereby readers sometimes take reserved items to other sections of the library where they can find seats. Once such sections are out of the view and close supervision of the staff, mutilation of books can take place. Only the vigilance of the staff can detect such mutilations.

Inadequate furniture items

Allied with the problem of space is inadequate furniture. This ranges from table and chairs for readers, to shelves for books, to chairs and tables for the staff. This reduces the effectiveness of the unit since it can not attend to enough readers.

Improper shelving of materials

A fourth management problem is disorganised shelves. Because the staff is overworked with direct service to readers, shelving is almost always not up-to-date. Consequently, retrieval of books from the shelves is cumbersome. Shelves with few titles do not pose many problems because over time, staff become familiar with the titles and are able to locate them easily. This is not so with shelves with many titles.

Non-withdrawal of old and addition of new titles

Titles withdrawn from open access shelves for short loan become dormant on the shelves after a while. A number of reasons can be adduced for this. A title that was reserved two or three years back could become out-of-date; the staff and students who reserved it might have left the system; etc. When this happens, such titles might not be in high demand any longer. Similarly, the library staff out of lack of commitment to duty does not ask lecturers for fresh lists of materials to be reserved.

Lack of work tools

The State Government funds state universities in Nigeria. Consequently, the proper funding of the university is at the discretion of the State Administrator/Governor. This problem is compounded by the poor economic situation in the country. In a country where the library is a "grey" area, other services in the university are given more attention than the library. This results in the poor provision of work tools such as files for keeping lists of books, paper for listing items, biros, etc.

Lack of qualified staff to man the unit

As a result of poor financial support, the number of staff needed to adequately staff the unit is never available. Since shift duty operates in the unit, the few available staff is shared between morning and afternoon shifts. This number is further depleted when some have to go off duty. In some extreme cases staff defers their off-duties to vacation period when only one shift is operated.

Suggested solutions to problems

In view of the importance of the quick service collection to teaching in the university, efforts should be made to reduce the workload of staff in the unit. One way of tackling this problem is to ensure a consistent and constant deployment of staff to the unit. Staff posted to the unit should not be allowed to remain there for too long. In that way, the staff is relieved of the workload and pressures from time to time.

Similarly, some form of open access could be introduced. For instance, readers could be allowed to go into the stack areas to select what they want. The staff would closely supervise the search for materials and then charge them out thereafter.

Incentives such as commendation letters at the end of each semester could be written to staff of the unit. The head of unit could also introduce a welfare package that may attract other staff to the unit.

A close study of the actual situation reveals that the space problem is not limited to this unit alone but applies to the entire library as well. This means that there is need for expansion that could arise from having a new library building, a modification to the existing library building, or a complete re-arrangement of materials. In the case of Edo State University, a new and larger library has already been constructed and commissioned. In the new building a section of one floor has been earmarked for the collection. On the other hand, some modifications could be done at the Delta State University to the library. There is space for expansion of the building where some blocks can be added to the building to create more space.

Shelving of books is usually left to the staff of readers' services alone. Since there is a limit to

the number of staff that can be employed for the division, and since the limited number of staff cannot adequately shelve all the books in the library some means have to be devised to tackle this problem. One such means is to allocate shelving of library books to the junior category of staff in the library. The first few hours of the morning could be used for shelving by these staff before settling down to their duties in Technical Services, Collection Development or any other section of the library to which they belong. This should be done under the close supervision of professional staff who would shelf-read.

The problem of inadequate funds could be resolved by the librarian's ability to present his case before the governing authorities. He *should* be able to convince management with sound arguments backed up by statistics of the serious need for funds in the unit.

Lastly, the problem of commitment to work has to be addressed by the use of persuasion, coercion and incentives. In another study the author (Ifidon 1998) found that as a result of the low level of staff commitment to work, morale was very low. The staff is not fully committed because of their divided interest: they look for additional sources of money to supplement their salaries.

Conclusion

As far back as 1970s, when the economy of Nigeria was still healthy, only about 10 percent of Nigerian students could afford to buy recommended textbooks. The need for functional library services is therefore, obvious and non-controversial. Quick service collections readily come to the rescue. Apart from ensuring that relevant and recommended library resources are pulled together for maximum utilisation, they help to safeguard expensive and important library materials. This is because of the closed access nature of the collections.

A number of problems are associated with the management of quick service collections. These include pressure of work; inadequacy of furniture, space and work tools; improper shelving of

materials; inadequate manpower; and the lack of commitment to duty. However, with proper funding and the use of some management techniques, quick service collections can be better managed.

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