

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES AND THE PROMOTION OF EXCELLENCE IN SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper is a qualitative research aimed at examining Academic Libraries and the promotion of Excellence in Scholarly Communication in Nigeria. Academic libraries are vital and indispensable in scholarly communication process. The establishment of academic libraries in the accomplishment of part of their cardinal role of quality service delivery has opened new avenues for scholars to communicate and disseminate their findings with the aim of ensuring that the majority of their peers and the society at large benefit from it. Academic libraries and scholars have a relationship in the sense that they depend on each other for the actualization of their goals. Intellectual information is created by scholars, while libraries organize, preserve and disseminate same. The fact that most of the scholarly outputs in Nigeria occur in the tertiary institution is incontestable. Hence, scholarly communication becomes vital for the institution's success and prestige. This review was carried out utilizing secondary data from text books, journals, conference proceedings etc. The findings revealed that inadequate funding was a major setback in promoting scholarly communication in academic libraries. It was recommended that relevant agencies should increase the financial budget of university libraries for maintenance and sustainability of their repositories to enhance scholarly communication, there should be regular training of librarians for quality service delivery, there should be the use of effective advocacy to create awareness among stakeholders among others. The paper concludes that academic libraries are central to the promotion of scholarly communication in Nigeria.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, Excellence, Scholarly Communication

Introduction

The dream of most scholars or researchers is to strive for excellence and ensure that their works are communicated in a scholarly manner which is the yardstick for academic quality assurance. In achieving this, both the scholars and the institutions through their libraries have a role to play. The libraries become excellent access points to knowledge production and dissemination sites to enhance excellence in scholarly output. Excellence as cited in Brusoni (2014) is therefore seen as outstanding, or as a quality that surpasses a defined threshold in a particular

field. Academic libraries are the pivot of this achievement because they unarguably serve as repositories and data bank for information storage. In order words, they serve as storehouse of scientific memory creating an avenue for upcoming scholars to develop successfully, (Ferrari, 2007). Simply put, for an institution's scholarly work or content to be publicly communicated, the library becomes an interface for this to be achieved through their repositories. Institutional repositories according to Lynch (2003) are regarded as essential infrastructure for modern scholarship. He argues that "the development of institutional repositories emerged as a new strategy that allows universities to apply serious, systematic leverage to accelerate changes taking place in scholarship and scholarly communication". For this reason, Anyanwu (2016) posits that the library is a social institution and that it is a collection of information resources made available to people for reference and lending. The reference and lending are geared towards effective research communication. This way, access to journals is provided to help users or patrons have the knowledge required in carrying out electronic research on their own. Scholarly communication is the process through which academic, scholars and researchers share and publish the outcome of their research findings so that they are made available to the academic community and those in related group or field. There are methods or various channels of scholarly communication. However, despite the roles played, these are without some issues in academic libraries repositories and scholarly communication.

Literature Review

Concept of Academic Libraries

The academic library, as Yusuf and Iwu (2010) put it, is the nerve centre or the hub around which scholarship revolves. It is an indispensable instrument for intellectual development, being a store house of information to which users (students as well as lecturers) may turn to for accessing information. Akalumhe (2010) asserts that the university library is the core and heart of the institution as they are set up to carry out the responsibility of selecting, acquiring and organising materials to support the teaching, learning, research and community responsibilities of their parent institution. Aguolu in Okiy (2011) argued that academic library is the heart of the institution. She went further to say that this is because the academic health, intellectual vitality and effectiveness of any institution depend largely on the state of health and excellence of its library which is its life hood. To buttress this point, Okiy cited the British University Grants Committee as having noted that an adequate library is not only the basis of all teaching and study; it is the essential condition of research without which additions cannot be made to

the sum of human knowledge. Bitagi and Udoudou (2013) argued that the availability of all forms and types of information resources in academic libraries is highly imperative if these libraries are to meet with the information needs of researchers in their parent institutions. Academic library has been described as the handmaid of scholarship, and the pivot upon which academic programmes revolve (Uwa, 2014). Similarly, Andersson (2011) in Uwa (2014) define academic library as a library that is attached to a higher academic institution, which serves two complementary purposes to support the curricular of higher institution, and to support the research of the university, faculty and students. Gwuanyi (2009) cited in Amogu, Okezie and Akidi (2017) Academic library has a crucial role to play in the development of a community. This is achieved through implementing ideas, opening up minds, recognition of knowledge, releasing the yoke of imagination, creating the opportunity for man to think critically and independently and reinforcing the dynamism of progress.

Concept of Excellence

The concept of excellence may be viewed in different ways. For the purposes of this paper, excellence is regarded as very good or outstanding performance in an endeavour. However, the concept in this study will focus on institutions and scholars. According to Ruben (2007), excellence can be defined fundamentally as exhibiting characteristics that are exceptional. Excellence is an important tool in determining the success of any institution of higher learning which is measured by the academic performance of her students and staff in the area of research. Excellence according to Wikipedia (2017) is a talent or quality which is unusually good and so surpasses ordinary standard. It is a continuously moving target that can be pursued through action of integrity, being frontrunner in terms of products/services provided that are reliable and safe for the intended users, meeting all obligation and continually learning and improving in all spheres to pursue the moving target. Excellence in research simply means the quantity and quality of research output or activity. According to Brusoni (2014) is termed as a mark of distinction, describing something that is exceptional, meritocratic, and outstanding and exceeding normal expectations. It is a form of commendation commonly linked to the reputation of institutions and to the achievements of students.

Concept of Scholarly Communication

The scholarly communication is the process of sharing, disseminating and publishing research findings of academic and researchers so that the generated academic contents are made available to the global academic communities (UNESCO 2015). ARCL (2003) defined scholarly communication as "the system through which research and other scholarly writings are created, evaluated for quality, disseminated to the scholarly community, and preserved for future use. The system includes both formal means of communication, such as publication in peer-reviewed, journals and informal channels, such as electronic listservs." These formal and informal processes are means through which research results and other scholarly work are disseminated to other researchers and scholars, students, policy makers and the public. In support of this, Thorin (2003) divides scholarly communication into three main distinct aspects: the process of conducting research, developing ideas, and communicating these ideas informally with other scholars and scientists, the process of preparing, shaping, and communicating to a group of colleagues what will become formal research results and the published formal product that is distributed to libraries and other places in print form or electronically. In the same vein, Keener (2013) expands on the concept of scholarly communication system beyond scholarly publishing, and includes both informal and formal networks used by scholars to develop ideas, exchange information, certify research, publish findings, disseminate results, and preserve outputs. It is a broader term reflecting various processes through which scholars exchange information with one another in the course of knowledge creation. Furthermore, Scholarly communication is achieved either through informal channels and means such as personal contacts through lectures, conferences, seminars or by means of publishing scholarly work in recognized channels such as refereed journals, books or other publications like conference proceedings, theses and dissertations (Rao, 2001). This can be given wider publicity through the institutions repository.

Channels of Scholarly Communications

These are several ways through which scholarly contents can be communicated and made available to researchers otherwise called the primary sources or original literature as shown in the diagram, figure 1 below:

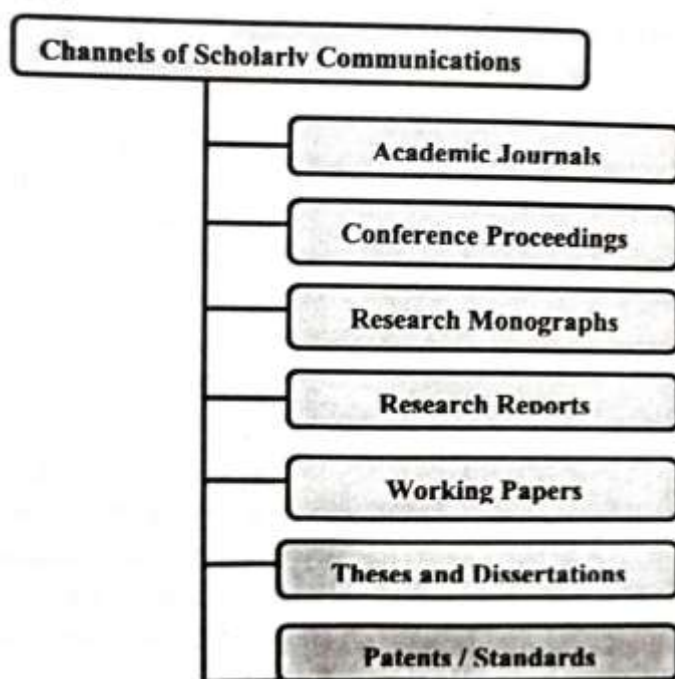


Figure 1: Scholarly Communication Channels

Source: www.jisc.3/jisc.uk/whatwedo/campaigns/res3/jischelp.aspx

The various channels of scholarly communication are summarized as follows:

Periodicals (Academic Journals): This is a general term for print or electronic publications which appear in parts and is regarded as the main method of scholarly communication available to researchers. According to Obi (2013), it provides access to current and original content of research output in all field of knowledge. The impact of periodicals in research environment is highly esteemed in terms of credibility, accessibility and quality assurance. They are usually issued at regular intervals.

Scientific Conference Proceedings: They are considered as a good avenue for reaching out to expert communities in an interactive mode to get feedbacks on presented researched papers. Proceedings contain the contributions made by researchers at the conference. Conference papers are usually published and distributed as printed volumes or in electronic formats before or after the conference. The new trend is that many conferences are co-publishing presented conference papers in online proceedings, available with commercial publishers' knowledge gateways. Some conference organizers are even collaborating with academic journals to publish special issues, selecting certain number of highly quality papers presented in the respective conference.

Research Monographs: This is also a good option for publishing results of research. In some books, collections of chapters written by different authors are considered, where each chapter is a kind of research paper depicting certain amount of results of a research work.

Research Reports: These are the primary sources of information to be consulted by researchers who may need such information (Uwa, 2014). Research reports are formal mode of research communication to record and disseminate research results to funding agencies and other stakeholders involved in the research process. They also contain the finding of a progress of work carried out by researchers.

Theses and Dissertations: These are formal mode of academic research communication to record and disseminate research results of doctoral and master's level research studies, undertaken by enrolled students in higher educational institutions and universities.

Working Papers: They are a type of scholarly papers to communicate findings of research in progress. Working papers help the researchers in getting quantitative and timely feedbacks for making certain changes in research design or analysis of generated data.

Patents/Standards: They are means of protecting or securing the right of ownership of intellectual property resulting from scientific projects or discoveries. A new product or process or technique derived from a scientific research work, which has certain applications for the betterment of human life, is patentable and inventors can claim it as their intellectual property by registering it with patenting authorities by following certain legal procedures.

Academic Libraries and the Promotion of Scholarly Communication

Most academic libraries all over have been positioned to be at the forefront of scholarly communication. Therefore, to remain functional in performing its basic roles in line with goal and mission of such libraries, some of these roles are enumerated and explained as follows:

- Exploitation of new opportunities in the area of new technologies to enhance scholar communication for scholar and avail them the privilege of benefiting from the open access to the world of networking thereby meeting the need of providing quality services delivery in this era of technology. In the past, research materials were confined to information within the walls of the libraries making it difficult for scholars to expand on their information. There is a strong connection between Open Access and the

mission of libraries because libraries are involved in a wide range of Open Access-related activities. Academic libraries play an important role through the professional librarians in the area of ICT to ensure that the institutional digital contents or assets are assembled, accessed and then disseminated for scholarly communication through their repository. By this, excellence in scholarly communication is enhanced. Most institutional repositories are hosted within academic libraries around the world to digitally collect and preserve academic papers and documents in order to make them freely accessible to the students, faculty and the public (Swan & Chan 2009, in (Jain 2012).

- On the other hand, Librarians in performing the role of organization of the library structure help organize outreach programs aimed at sensitizing and creating awareness and teaching scholars the implication of copyright, open access and other issues with reference to scholarly communication. Authors are not left out of this benefit as they now have full knowledge on their intellectual property rights via the education offered to them by Librarians while at the same time being assisted with the interpretation and amendment of publication contracts.
- Librarians also ensure consistency and accuracy of metadata by analysing policies, procedures and workflows. They are also involved in identifying and recruiting new content, and editing existing content as needed (Murugan, 2016).
- A pivotal role by academic libraries is the provision of universal access points for information. When free access to information is widely publicized, scholarly works are enhanced. This is why, access to journals or articles are provided to help users or patrons have the knowledge required in carrying out electronic research on their own. Scholarly communication is the process through which academic, scholars and researchers share and publish the outcome of their research findings so that they are made available to the academic community and those in related group or field without any cost implication.

Challenges faced by Academic Libraries in Scholarly Communication Despite the benefits associated with scholarly communications through academic libraries, there are variety of challenges and barriers confronted with academic libraries in the following ways:

- Central to the success, sustainability and maintenance of scholarly communication by academic library is adequate and stable funding. Maintenance of institutional repositories to promote the effective and efficient communication of scholarly outputs is expensive and capital intensive. Most times, the rising cost of yearly journal subscriptions exceed institutional library budgets and as result, adequate fund is required but this is not so in most cases. Inadequate fund has become a barrier to the smooth operation of scholarly communication. Chesenga (2000) noted that many libraries in sub-Saharan Africa especially academic, school and public libraries depend entirely on government funding for their operations. Funding from government is no longer adequate. According to Okiy (2010), this inadequate funding from government is a major setback to digitization efforts of academic libraries in Nigeria. Jain (2012) citing Abukutsa-Onyango (2010) also pointed out that there had been two-fold problems in the past: inability to afford subscriptions to journals and inability to integrate national research into the global knowledge pool.
- Lack of skilled personnel is a challenge confronting most academic libraries in scholarly communication. Implementation of institutional repository, management of electronic resources, preservation techniques all require requisite technological skills, however, such technological skill is either totally absent in some libraries or inadequate.
- Other setbacks to the success of scholarly communication are the issues of bandwidth. This according to Jensen (2006) bandwidth is the life-blood of the world's knowledge economy. But it is scarce where it is most needed in the developing nations of Africa which require low cost communications to accelerate their socio-economic development.

Strategies for enhancing Scholarly Communication

In spite the challenges and obstacles confronting academic libraries, here are positive indications advanced in this study to strategize scholarly communication. They include the following:

- Relevant agencies should increase the financial share or budget of university libraries for maintenance and sustainability of their repositories for ease of scholarly communication.

- Training and development for librarians in the face of new knowledge is a key to performing their various jobs and roles in a more effective and efficient manner. Hulton (2010) in Ojowhoh (2016) is of the view that when gaps exist between the job requirement, job productivity suffers.
- Use of effective advocacy. Institutional repository is a new system to ensure that scholarly output is disseminated by Nigerian academic libraries and many stakeholders are not fully aware of this opportunity and their potential benefits. Effective and efficient advocacy becomes very important avenue in achieving this change. The academic libraries through their librarians should therefore sponsor and organize campaign programmes from time to time in order to sensitize the various groups concerned aimed at creating adequate awareness.

Recommendations/Conclusion

The role of academic libraries in ensuring the dissemination and excellent communication of scholarly outputs in Nigeria is highly imperative. It is clear that one of the greatest impediments in achieving this is inadequate funding. There is need for adequate provision of funds to accommodate the maintenance and sustainability of communication of scholarly output among academic libraries. The use of effective advocacy to create awareness among stakeholders should be encouraged. Unskilled staff and lack of awareness by various stakeholders in scholarly communication also pose a challenge. This calls for regular training and retraining of library personnel to meet up with the quality of services expected of them is equally important among the recommendation made to address or tackle the identified challenges.

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