
Challenges facing information literacy efforts in Kenya: a case study of selected university libraries in Kenya

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Keywords

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Abstract

The ability to access, evaluate and use information is a prerequisite for lifelong learning, and a basic requirement for the information society. At the university level, students are expected to contact independent exploration in diverse disciplines and topics and therefore, irrespective of their areas of study, they need to use information effectively. They should not only master the skill of finding information in print format or electronic formats, but also be able to evaluate and use it competently both in their study activities as well as in their later lives. This paper examines why the acquisition of these information skills is a matter of necessity and they are a prime factor in quality learning in Kenyan universities. It concludes that although there have been efforts to ensure information literacy among university students, there is need to build on these efforts through collaborative efforts between librarians and faculty members particularly through joint curriculum design and implementation.

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Introduction

The ultimate goal of any library service is to ensure that the clients are able to access the information for purposes for which they require it. This raises the need to teach information literacy to clients with the goal of assisting clients to identify and select relevant information using appropriate search strategies and being able to evaluate, organise and synthesise that information into a meaningful presentation. The ultimate goal of a comprehensive information literacy course is to inculcate in the individual the ability to recognise when information is required and to teach them to understand how the information is organised, and how to access it. This is of critical importance in the university setting where teaching approaches emphasise independence on the part of the student in accessing and synthesising information from different sources in the creation of new knowledge (Harrison, 1994).

Information literacy also aims to teach students how to find information and prepare them for lifelong learning because they can “always find information needed for any task or decision at hand” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 1989). This is important in the context of today’s information society in which information is the most critical resource and basis for competition (Tarelo and Gaudette, 1996). The information society calls for all people to become information literate which means that they should not only be able to recognise when information is needed but also be able to identify, locate, evaluate and use effectively information needed for decision making or fulfilling different goals.

Information literacy is increasingly important in the present context of the information explosion and concomitant uncertainties about its authenticity, validity, and reliability. Individuals are faced with diverse and abundant choices in print, as well as the electronic formats. Unlike print resources, which are subject to a variety of quality assurance processes as they pass through authors and publishers as well as being recommended by tutors, the quality of information available from the Internet cannot be guaranteed (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2002). The challenge of critically evaluating, understanding and using information in this context, though



surmountable, is daunting. For the students, regardless of their discipline, information literacy skills enable them to master content and give them the confidence to proceed with investigation, be self-reliant and have a sense of being in control of their learning.

Methodology

The objective of this study was to investigate to what extent university libraries in Kenya are providing information literacy programmes. More specifically the study aimed at: first, identifying what forms of information literacy programmes are offered; second, assess how effective these programmes are from the point of view of librarians; and third, any problems faced by university libraries in carrying out information literacy programmes.

This is a case study of the practices of selected universities in Kenya. Kenya has six public universities and five chartered private universities. For inclusion in this study two public universities, the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University, and two private, the United States International University and the Catholic University of Eastern Africa were selected.

Data for this study were collected by means of interviews, using an interview schedule, with the chief librarians of each of the four universities. Information gathered was analysed, combined and presented as a single case study whereby areas of uniformity and difference are discussed in the presentation of findings.

The need for information literacy in Kenyan universities

Developing lifelong skills is central to the mission of higher education institutions and should provide the foundation for the continued growth of students in their later careers, and as members of the community. Information literacy is one of those skills which extends learning beyond formal classroom settings as individuals move out of the university into areas of responsibility. The information revolution, along with its attendant explosive growth of knowledge, has resulted in the information age that affects all aspects of economic, social and political life

(Economic Commission for Africa, 1996). At the same time it has been observed that proper utilisation of information creates opportunities for dealing with current problems in developing countries such as poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation (Talero and Gaudette, 1996). It is the Kenyan government's expectation that a free flow of timely information to the public in both rural and urban areas can inculcate industrial thinking among the people. This will assist in developing a commercial culture among workers, investors and consumers and create an atmosphere for self employment, awareness of business opportunities and expansion through the proper use of business information (Republic of Kenya, 1997). In addition this is the key to improved nutrition, sanitation, agricultural input and even community participation in development. This would, however, only be possible if this information flow is accompanied by efforts to inculcate information literacy among the people. For the university students it is therefore essential that information literacy become one of those transferable skills. This would help them cope in the information-based society and provide a competitive advantage to themselves and the wider society.

Kenyan, in common with many other African universities, are witnessing a rapid growth in computer networking and the use of computerised databases to access information in their libraries (Rosenberg, 1997). There is evidence of a departure from a total reliance on print-based information to the use of electronic and digital formats in which information can be stored and accessed (Agalo, 1998). For example both the Catholic University of Eastern Africa and the United States International University have functional Online Public Access Catalogues (OPAC) systems while University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University are in the process of inputting their records into computer databases. The four universities examined in this study indicated that they are in the process of integrating electronic and Internet-based sources in their collections. Kenyatta University reported that they have established a vote for the purchase of CD-ROMs if departments order these. The Catholic University of Eastern Africa has switched from print to the purchase of most of its indexing and abstracting journals in

CD-format; examples of these are the *Humanities Index*, *Social Sciences Index*, *Philosophy Index*, *Education Index* and *Religious and Theological Abstracts*. Major advances at the United States International University include subscribing to the Ebscohost electronic base so that the library can access a large number of journals electronically which provide full text articles or indexes. But working against this trend is a lack of basic computer skills, which would enable students to search for information sources through the computerised catalogues as well as navigate the Internet. Without this training it is unlikely that electronic information sources will be used effectively.

All too many students in Kenya enter higher education with a very limited idea of the role of, and how to access information. Young people generally have restricted access to reading materials due to very poorly developed school and public library systems and book collections in primary schools (Odini, 2000). Most first year students in Kenyan universities have been found to lack the sophisticated skills that are needed to exploit the library's research potential. They feel intimidated by the complexity and size of a large library; reluctant to ask for assistance in the use of the library; and lack awareness of the services and resources available in the university library (Mathu, 1987). In the university setting the learning is structured so as to create a student-centred learning environment where inquiry is the norm and the focus is on critical thinking and problem solving. Stress is placed on extensive and intensive reading as well as critical evaluation and the integration of information from various sources. This presents fresh students with a totally new challenge that they may never overcome unless sound instruction is provided to ensure that they master information skills. Not being accustomed to exploring, discovering and retrieving information from library sources, students waste a lot of time going through the wrong sources and using retrieval tools on trial and error basis (Mwige, 1990). Therefore the selection and finding of information sources needed for academic tasks is often confusing and rather incomprehensible until the new student is shown how the system works.

Generally university libraries in Africa have, since their inception, suffered from a lack of adequate professional human resources

leading to an imbalance in development. For example in Kenya, whereas concerted efforts were put into building collections that responded to the needs of both students and faculty, training users in information access and use received little or no meaningful attention (Njuguna, 1981). The rate of acquisitions has, for a long time, been the most common measure of performance of university libraries. The main concern has been the statistics relating to the number of volumes and titles for monographs and journals, the annual acquisition rate and sometimes the general usage of the library facility with little regard for extent to which users are empowered to use the resources. The situation in public universities has been exacerbated by the government policy of downsizing of manpower in the public sector leading to the retrenchment of library support staff in a number of institutions. Consequently, the professional staff that are available are forced to spend up to four hours a day either shelving materials or filing catalogue cards instead of engaging in reference work (Kavulya, 1995).

The quality of use of the library is influenced by the students' perception of the role of information in their learning process. Their inability to access and use information in Kenya has led to a tendency to generally place reliance on their lecturer's notes. This is reinforced by teaching methods that do not encourage independent learning based on the student's critical analysis and synthesis of ideas from current information sources. The negative impact of this trend has been observed in below standard term papers and poor performance in examinations (Owing, 1991). While this has been exacerbated by the poor state of the library collection and other learning facilities, it has led to an erosion in the quality of university learning. Employers prefer graduates from specific universities or those trained abroad, while university students applying for admission to foreign universities are viewed with suspicion or compelled to take preparatory university courses before gaining admission (Sifuna, 1997).

Important types of information literacy skills

The advantage of providing information literacy programmes for Kenyan university

students is that it would impart skills and training leading to the efficient and effective use of information databases linked to critical thinking. The most basic requirement is to gain the ability to recognise a need for information and how it may be addressed. This includes knowledge of appropriate kinds of resources, both print and non-print, how best to select the right sources for different tasks, and the ability to understand issues related to accessibility such as costs and location. Second, it develops competence in constructing strategies for locating and accessing the information. This includes the proper articulation of information need, how to match information needs against resources, the principles of construction and generation of databases, search strategies, basic use of information communication technologies, use of databases, indexing, abstracting and citation indexes, as well as how to maintain current awareness. Third, it gives the ability to compare and evaluate and extract information obtained from different sources while avoiding bias, and selecting accurate and reliable information sources. The fourth competence is that of organising, applying and communicating information effectively depending on the situation. This includes accurate citation, proper use of language, respect for copyright and avoidance of plagiarism. However the most critical skill is ability to synthesise and build upon existing information, thus contributing to the creation of new knowledge.

These skills are essential for successful university study as well as for career development. Not only are students expected to write term papers throughout their courses but also by the end of their university course students in most Kenyan universities are expected to be able to carry out field research on specific issues and write dissertation reports. Those taking business courses are required to write business plans. In particular graduate students need to demonstrate competence in their area of specialisation through well-argued papers backed by the evidence of having a firm grip of the facts and the ability to synthesise information. The possession of these information literacy skills makes the tasks more manageable. In the wider world, whether in the civil service, business world or in non-governmental organisations, good performance requires the creation of proposals and reports based on

effective access and synthesis of information. People in all professions, such as doctors, social workers, teachers, politicians, development workers, environmental activists, small and medium business owners, business managers – all need to be information literate to effectively function in their areas. Above all in the information society lifelong learning which people must undertake to update ever-changing skills in all professions requires the ability to handle information effectively.

Approaches to information literacy in Kenya: a case study of selected university libraries

There are different forms of information literacy programmes provided in Kenyan universities. These include library orientation, library instruction courses, individual instruction or reference service, and use of library manuals and guides. In all of the four universities examined library orientation is mandatory and takes place in the first and second weeks when new students report to the university. Library orientation aims to make students aware of the library facilities, information resources and services available to them. It includes activities such as the distribution of informational material that describes the library system, the resources and services, introductory lectures, tours conducted by the staff and demonstrations on how to find and retrieve information using different tools such as catalogues, and journal indexes. The length of the orientation session differs from one university to another, however on average for each group of 30 students, an orientation session of 30 minutes is assigned. While library orientation is useful as an initial introduction to the library and its functions, in the Kenyan context, its effectiveness is hampered by a failure to come up with realistic and achievable objectives. For example the limited time allocated to the lecture, demonstration and tour is inadequate to impart useful skills to new university students. The timing of library orientation programmes in the first and second week of students' life in the university is poor since at this time students have little motivation to participate, and may not be in a position to appreciate the centrality of the library in academic life. There is also an insufficient

number of staff to cope with large numbers of first students in a relatively short time. It is indicated that, according to the university timetable, the orientation should happen in the first two weeks so as not to infringe the lecture time of other subjects i.e. before serious class attendance begins. Having to attend to large groups within a short period of time makes the orientation superficial and incomplete.

The greatest advantage of providing personal instruction as part of the reference service is that skills are imparted when the learner is most motivated to use them. All four universities report having a reference service of one kind or another. The reference service not only leads to the answering of specific questions, but also facilitates personalised instruction in the methods of identifying and retrieving library materials. In some cases, such as Kenyatta University and United States International University, students are given detailed instruction on how to prepare search strategies, construct bibliographies, write term papers, and citation practice. It is seen as a useful remedial measure when individual students are not conversant with the information services available, how to use specific information aids such as indexes, catalogues, bibliographies and plan and accomplish their written assignments.

However in Kenya such personal attention is hampered by shortage of staff, and a lack of awareness on the part of students of the role of librarians in providing guidance in information use. The University of Nairobi main library and the Catholic University of Eastern Africa library, for example, do not have reference librarians. In both cases after the previous incumbents left the posts three years ago no replacements have been made. In these two cases reference information is provided at the circulation desk. As a result this is scanty, unplanned and inadequate. Kenyatta University has a more elaborate system of reference service whereby each main subject area, e.g. science, education, social sciences, and arts and humanities, have at least three professional librarians to provide reference and referral services. United States International University has two reference librarians who instruct and direct individual users in information access and use.

Library guides and manuals would also be of value in enhancing the effectiveness of

students' information retrieval activities. The advantage of these tools is that students can consult them when they need to retrieve information, or remind themselves how to do it long after they have forgotten what they learnt during the orientation sessions. Both Kenyatta University and University of Nairobi are reported to have had in the past an elaborate library manual. However due to a lack of funds they are no longer able to print and circulate copies among new users as is the case with the Catholic University of Eastern Africa and United States International University.

There is widespread adoption of electronic information systems in Kenya university libraries. All four universities are either using or developing electronic databases. They are also using electronic information storage and retrieval devices such as CD-ROMs and students can access Internet-based resources. As electronic services are introduced, new skills need to be developed by both the academics and students. Only the Catholic University of Eastern Africa and United States International University report that they are instructing their users in the OPAC systems. However this training is based on the assumption that students have a basic knowledge of computer operations and therefore with a brief introduction they should be able to use the electronic information databases. However as librarians reported to this researcher this is not the case. Being unfamiliar with information technology, new university students are reluctant to use electronic sources, the main reason being a lack of database search skills, unawareness of what to expect, and what assistance these services are capable of providing.

The most recent development in information literacy efforts in Kenyan universities is the communication skills course for undergraduate students regardless of their subject specialisation. In this course, students are taught a variety of skills including library, reading, as well as writing skills. All universities examined in this research project, apart from United States International University, are offering communication skills courses. The communication skills course is designed to assist new university students to become familiar with particular skills associated with university academic work. Therefore its main goal is to facilitate a

fruitful interaction between students and information resources by enhancing user independence, confidence and accuracy in exploiting the information resource for learning purposes. The library skills component of the communication skills course is to ensure that the user can exploit library resources adequately, by establishing a link between the subject taught and the literature available. In all institutions examined the communication skills course is compulsory and examined. It was reported that the libraries are not involved in either the design or the delivery of communication skills course. In spite of its positive contribution towards information literacy, communication skills courses have been beset with problems ranging from lack of personnel to teach the courses, especially with background in librarianship, large groups which account for the prevalence of the lecture method, and a lack of evaluation of its effectiveness. Other complaints include that it is of limited value in the face of a lack of useful information resources especially in the public university libraries. The element of an examination makes students approach it from a purely theoretical point of view therefore failing to relate it to daily information use. It is offered only once in the university life of the students. Non-librarians who have limited knowledge of how libraries work teach the library skills aspect. Above all there is evidence of a lack of collaboration between the communication skills department and other departments in creating a course that fits well with all the subjects offered by the university.

Conclusion and recommendations

Library orientation, library manuals personalised reference services, and computer oriented training programmes and communication skills courses are useful in that they focus on the main problems of fresh undergraduate students: finding materials they need, and knowing when, and from whom, they should ask for assistance with confidence. The experience gained through information literacy programmes can be useful in knowing how to use any other information centre. However, as it can be seen from the earlier discussion, information literacy training for university students in Kenya is not a success story. It is observed

that, in spite of scattered efforts, the majority of students are forced to pass through the university system without ever mastering the art of information retrieval and use.

The main barriers that university libraries face in providing information literacy programmes are a lack of both financial and human resources, and inadequate support by their parent organisations, in terms of both policy and materially. There is also a failure on the part of librarians to push to the fore information literacy as being a function of the university library. Their ability to develop computer skills is hindered by a lack of financial and human resources. In most cases there are only a few workstations available for library use, with little or no resources to acquire others. There is still computer illiteracy among Kenyan librarians hence a shortage of personnel to provide IT training. With an absence of institutional policies as far as information technology is concerned, libraries find it hard to mount effective training in the use of information sources for their users.

More than ever, in Kenya as in the rest of the developing world, with the increasing recognition throughout the world that proper use of information is a prerequisite for progress, library services should be regarded as an integral resource, and not merely an optional part of higher education. All university students, as well as the community at large, should be able to effectively obtain and use information whatever the source, location or format. For this to be possible they need to understand how information is structured and organised. Therefore information literacy should be regarded as a key aspect of university learning activities. Librarians, with their expertise in information organisation and retrieval, are best placed to understand the information skills needs of fresh university students and address them appropriately.

However librarians alone cannot accomplish the task. To have practical application information literacy instruction is best carried out in the context of the students' daily information use. The teaching faculty can contribute to effective information literacy programmes by encouraging the students to use libraries and build information usage into their teaching programmes. There is a need to develop programmes that address the different information needs across all the

courses in the university curriculum. Therefore success can only be achieved through collaboration between the library personnel and experts in the different disciplines. From the organisational perspective there is need for campus, wide policies that integrate information literacy as an integral part of the university curriculum. This will facilitate the support that libraries need in terms of facilities, finance, and staff training.

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