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Subject Specialist in Academic Libraries: An Overview

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Abstract

The new trends in information retrieval system can be found in different format i.e. e-resources such as on-line journals, electronic data bases, books and data bases on web, and the rise of student enrolment, with lean annual budgetary allocation alongside other factors are posing more challenges to compel academic libraries to review their service delivery method to their numerous clientele in other to be more relevant in the complexity of information environment. This paper is an attempt to provide an overview of subject specialists in the context of global trends affecting librarianship and argue that subject specialists have crucial role to play in contemporary academic environment in terms of collection development liaison with library clients, referencing and library literacy. However, the paper concludes that subject specialists are crucial in the academic library as a service institution.

Keywords:*Subject specialists, academic libraries, service delivery, information retrieval, global trends and knowledge management.*

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Introduction / Literature Review

Traditionally, academic libraries have been seen as the heart of academic institutions, a fundamentally important place to researchers, teachers, students and communities where such institutions are located. Traditionally, researchers, as well as teachers and students make use of the library regularly or when the need arises to browse the content of library shelves, interact with library staff for their information needs, borrow books, photocopy relevant articles of interest and spend time to reading within the walls of the library.

A perusal of literature on subject specialist has gone multifarious and libraries in academic environment are changing significantly. Feldman (2006) examined the role of subject specialization in the evolving environment of academic libraries in the context of traditional roles they have played in collection development, instruction and reference. Yakushin (2005) examined "relevance of subject librarian" where he asserts that they are responsible for adequate library services in a particular subject field, while Pinfield (2001) research work argues that subject librarians form a significant grouping of senior staff in most UK academic libraries have significant roles to play in the delivery of both traditional and electronic materials. Okumura et, al (2005) strongly advocates for training of subject librarians to provide special subject services and that improvement is required in appointment and staff training in the system.

Tezuka (2005) points out that subject librarians are most qualified to be engaged in the collection and dissemination of information and reference services as this leads to improvement of library operation. Similarly, Law (1999) emphasizes that subject specialist tends to have highly developed territorial instincts expressed in development of library collection. Fourie (1999) in his work also argues that the current state of technological development where end-users of information can easily help themselves obviates the need for information specialist or subject librarian. Meiser (2010).

examines approaches to reference collection, development and information literacy by subject specialist librarian and suggested strategies for tackling the challenges faced by subject specialist librarian. Fuller, Harrington Livingston (2019) examines role of subject librarian in supporting teaching/learning and their scholarly, academic and research work to students, faculty staff and researchers in an academic library. Miller (2014) observes the growing importance of interdisciplinary approaches which has led to urgent need for subject-specific experts in academic libraries. Hoodless and Pinfied (2018) research focus on the need for some academic libraries to replace subject-based organizational structures with new functional structures introducing functional specialists in view of significant, impact of subject specialist in an academic environment. Corrall (2014) states that the role of subject librarian has been widely supported in academic libraries and the inclusion of subject

approach will continue to remain the dominant structure model in university libraries.

According to Agyen-hyaa (2008) nothing significant has been done in the area of subject librarians in most universities like in Africa just as Avafia (1983) further states that this is due to lack of appreciation of the virtues of this system of organization in academic libraries because resources, both human and material are limited. Bille University of Botsawana Library (1981) adopted the idea of subject librarianship with the view to develop and maintain the subject collection in the library, provide adequate reference and information services to all library patrons so as to provide a favourable climate for information delivery. Ogundipe (1990) paper titled "the subject specialist and readers services in academic libraries" emphasized that the best staff for an improved qualitative approach to reader services is the subject specialist which he strongly advocated for adoption in university libraries in Nigeria. Similarly, Adelabu (1994) supported the idea of recruiting subject librarians. He argues that when fully established subject librarian will not only assume substantially important functions within the academic community but also achieve full partnership with faculty members through collection development in teaching, research and public service functions.

Despite divergent views raised by different scholars in support of subject specialist in academic libraries due to changes not only occurring in knowledge management in academic libraries, there is an increased emphasis in interdisciplinary scholarship and research clusters. One trend that has received attention in library personnel is the change in recruitment criteria for staff of academic libraries due to impact of technology.

Further perusal of literature also shows that the concept of having subject specialist and their relevance in academic is not a new phenomenon in the library profession particularly in developed countries. In USA for example, Ohio University Colorado State University, University of Texas, Chicago University, Research Libraries and even American Library Association effect introduction of subject specialists. In Japan Universities like Chuo University, Tokyo University, Shiga University, Research Libraries and Toshiba Corporation among others adopted subject specialization in their libraries. In China, Universities and

Research Institutes adopted subject specialist concept in their libraries such as Beijing University, Chinese Defence Science and Technology, etc.

In Africa, University of Zambia, University of Botswana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology are notable examples while in Nigeria, University of Benin, University of Lagos, University of Jos are presently notable examples based on recommendations of National Universities Committee on Academic Planning which had some University Librarians as members (Ogundipe, 1982). This paper therefore attempts to provide an overview of relevance of subject specialist and their benefits in the contemporary academic environment.

The Concept of Subject Specialist

A subject specialist is a member of library staff appointed to develop one or more aspects of a library's technical or reference service in a particular subject field and such staff has some experience in the field and has obtained a first or research degree in the subject (Ogundipe, 1982). Holbrook (1972) defined subject specialist as a member of library staff appointed to organize library services in a particular subject field. The subject specialist would normally have obtained at least a first degree in the subject concerned, this supplemented by a postgraduate course in librarianship.

The trend in Germany provides that subject specialist (the librarian) must possess an additional master's degree or doctorate in a subject field plus what they call a scholarly approach to the position. Smith (1974) described the subject specialist as an expert in bibliographical organization of a field of knowledge and he utilizes this expertise to provide complex and needed services to a clientele. DiMattia (2010) asserted that a subject specialist must be subject expert which often requires an advanced degree in the subject of his specialization. He further conceived that in reality, such new employee will invariably need additional training in order to move ahead in their career progression in such environment.

The subject specialist or subject librarian system is common in academic libraries and elsewhere abroad. Many institutions in UK have different designation or titles for subject specialist. For example, Martin (1996) observed

that in United Kingdom many institutions have different designations or titles for subject specialist in their academic libraries – they are known as faculty librarian, subject specialist, liaison librarian, information librarian, information specialist, etc. Also, in USA the term subject bibliographer is still used to describe the subject librarian or subject specialist. They believe that a subject specialist denotes an individual with subject knowledge and qualifications. In University of Botswana, the term is used interchangeably Liaison Librarian or subject librarian. Agyenic-Gcyasi (2008) summarized the definition of subject specialist or subject librarian as a professional librarian who has the requisite subject knowledge acquired formally, or has extensive experience working within a particular discipline. He further emphasized that the title is not as important as the associated expertise; the key expertise being in-depth knowledge of a subject area and grounding in the principle of library use and organization.

From the foregoing, for subject specialist to perform in academic libraries effectively such an individual must have a detailed and intimate knowledge of the needs of his/her clientele, bibliographical organization and a thorough understanding of library operations, including limitations as well as the special capabilities they provide.

Objective

The objective of this paper is to document the authors' contributions to the debate as regards subject specialist in library service delivery particularly academic libraries which is achieved using content analysis of existing literature related to the topic.

The Need for Subject Specialist in an Academic Library

Subject specialist is thus an information and knowledge professional with expertise in bibliographic organization and knowledge in a particular subject field for development of literature in that subject field.

Thus, Ogundipe (1982) identified the following needs:

- The increased and growing bibliography output, the interdisciplinary nature of subject and the information explosion created a greater need for dissemination of information by subject specialist.

- The field was more diffused and library users needed help and made increasing demands for reference and other bibliographic assistance.
- Cataloguing and classification problems became more complex due to interdisciplinary relationship of subject and expansion of learning into new areas, language and culture.
- Non-availability of subject specialists versed in subject field to provide information need of clientele, responding and providing an in-depth service in their subject areas of specialization.
- The greater need to help users in exploitation of information and the use of library facilities in library. Most students have poor background knowledge of how to explore the resources of the library due to the fact that they are unaware or ignorant or not adequately exposed to vast possibilities of information available in their specific field of study.

Benefits to the Academic Library

Where subject specialists are in existence in academic library, AgyenGyasi (2008) identified the following benefits among others to be derived in term of service delivery to the library and the users.

Collection development: The most logical approach to collection development appears to be by subject. The subject specialists are therefore the most effective in selection of relevant materials because they have both the subject knowledge and the bibliographic skills to achieve this goal.

Another aspect in collection development is stock revision. A decision on which materials should be bound, replaced with new edition, discarded etc rest on subject specialist who is in the best position to know what books are relevant and can meaningfully effect stock revision.

Liaison: The library achieve a more efficient liaison between the faculties/department through this scheme, there is a constant flow of ideas between librarian and the faculty/lecturers. There will be cordial working relationship between the library and department which is beneficial to the system. It facilitates the efficient use of professional staff and maximizes the utilization of staff expertise/qualities.

Referencing: Provide efficient reference and bibliographic service because subject specialist is also aware of research interest of members of his faculty and can offer personalized services and Selective Dissemination of Information (S.D.I). This service delivery could be offered to teaching staff and the researchers and it fosters a crucial symbolic relationship between users, materials and specially trained staff.

The existence of subject specialist operating within subject division system will be exposed to a wide range of library duties which offer greater job and intellectual satisfaction. The job is seen in terms of developing their knowledge as well as making creative use of it. Intellectual satisfaction is thus achieved when he is able to satisfy the academic need of their users.

Library Literacy

Campbell (2006) stated that availability of information in various formats has made it harder to find information in numerous print publications, websites and databases. This certainly provides many opportunities for information literacy initiatives whereby subject librarians focus a significant amount of energy, on creating easier ways for students to find information by creating tools, such as tutorials and subject guides resources that are specifically tailored to subjects of study. Hence, it allows the user to become more empowered to find information on their own.

Subject librarians are therefore attuned to provide easier ways for patrons to find information and also continue to provide instructional classes in not only internet and database searching but in using blogging, creating web-pages and contributing to wikis along with discussing of scholarly communication. In addition, information needed in their information seeking behavior and the formats of information distribution in their subject field will be developed better while keeping users informed of where and how to find information in their area of specialization.

In summary, Hoodbrook (1972) however presents the most comprehensive picture of a subject specialist and his roles. Thus, the subject specialist in academic library has four major roles. He must be a policy maker, an educator, an academic and a manager. As policy maker, he advises the academic

department, as educator, he works with academic staff and the students to ensure the fullest possible use of the library's resources. As an academic in his own right, first and foremost, he must consistently keep in touch with his degree subject if he is to be able to command respect as an equal to other academic colleagues. As a manager, the subject specialist will be concerned with collection, building, cataloguing and other aspects of the physical nature of the collection and he also need to manage any subordinate library staff assigned to the subject area.

Recommendations

The subject specialists as the nomenclature suggests ought to have a subject area where he/she holds at least a degree as well as a professional library education. In this position, the specialist is to be abreast with resources (publications) and development in the subject field. This places the subject specialist at par with his colleagues in the faculty and thus plays effective role as a member.

As a professional librarian the specialists would then be able to deploy bibliographical techniques and skills to navigate their clienteles through the various resources in the library and particularly in his field. The subject specialist must be adequately supported to be abreast with the emerging technologies being propelled by ICT as the quantum of e-resources and the various applications are inevitable sources for the acquisition, accessibility and retrieval of information and knowledge resources for the advancement of humanity.

Furthermore, the need for specialization cannot be over emphasized as the publication explosion the world has come to experience in the last century makes it imperative for subject specialists to be call to the rescue, to restore order in the avalanche of the various forms and types of information and knowledge resources, thus making access and retrieval much easy for library patrons.

Conclusion

In general, the library is a service institution. The primary mission of academic library is to support teaching, learning and research activities of the parent

institution by providing access to information resources. Subject specialization system is one effective way in which these aims can be achieved by ensuring that the library remains user-centred.

Subject specialists are a valuable source, regardless of the changes occurring in academic libraries such as virtual reference, database resource licenses, digital repositories, search engines, slogs, instance messages and willies. However, the new developments we are experiencing are as a result of significant development in technology, organizational and administration of libraries, economic recession resulting in tight budgetary allocation and resulting to digital environment. The responsibilities of subject specialist reflect the subject and faculty structure of a given university. He acts as a single point of contact between library and faculty/department. Thus, ensure effective communication, promotes a more detailed awareness of users needs and ensure that the library's collection are balanced in line with academic programmes and the needs of the users.

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