PROFESSIONAL CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR LIBRARIANS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES: OPPORTUNITIES, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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INTRODUCTION

The type and opportunities for professional continuing education for librarians in Nigerian university libraries are examined. The paper reveals that in spite of the opportunities available to members of the profession in the country, librarians could not make the most of them as a result of lack of finance, obsolete equipment used for practicals, apathy towards further training by chief librarians, delays in remunerating beneficiaries and wrong societal perception of the library profession itself. Concludes that the prospect for professional continuing education for librarians in Nigerian university libraries is bright if the federal government continues to support the cause of librarianship in Nigeria and, only if, certain subjects that require education are expertly revisited.

It is a foregone conclusion that librarians working in the thirty-six (36) Nigerian university libraries should have basic education for the jobs they perform. The current issue is how to improve existing knowledge of practitioners through professional continuing education in order to make librarianship itself relevant to the academia. In this paper, professional continuing education refers to further training for librarians who possess bachelor of library or first degrees in different subject fields but with postgraduate qualifications in librarianship. Librarianship is being gradually accepted as a dynamic profession whose members should constantly seek for new and better ways of information acquisition, storage and dissemination through planned interactions among professional colleagues, as well as participation in short and long term courses in the country. Even the Federal Government of Nigeria [1] recognised the need for continuing education of professionals in the country when, in its National Policy on Education, it stated, amongst other things, that the objectives of continuing education shall be "to provide in-service, on-the-job, vocational and professional training for different categories of workers and professionals in order to improve their skills". More importantly, knowledge that is not updated rots away faster than an idle equipment kept in the open air. In order to arrest this inevitably, Aboyade [2], in a similar study, has rightly noted that "there is need for individuals to cope with new knowledge in the profession and to adopt to any new roles this increase in knowledge may entail. Continuing education is also desirable for personal intellectual growth and the cultivation of a broad out look. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that it should be taken seriously, collectively and individually by members of any profession".

The duties of librarians in university libraries surpass mere collection and arrangement of books and other library materials as seen by lay persons. They range from simple reference and information services, charging and discharging of books to more complex routines such as cataloguing, classification, indexing, current awareness service, selective dissemination of information, etc. Although the foundation for the skills necessary for the accomplishment of the aforementioned activities have been laid by the librarians' basic education, in some areas, knowledge related to modern information services can (only) be gained through continuing education rather than through formal academic programmes [3].

Agolu [4], in a related study, agreed that for the librarians to be able to discharge their duties to
the best of their knowledge, they should keep abreast of current literature in their fields and develop themselves through seminars, conferences, workshops, etc. Also believing in the efficacy of knowledge to be acquired through professional continuing education for librarians, Adelabu [5] feels that opportunities for continuing education for the academic librarian should be made a common feature of our future university libraries if such librarians are to fulfil their new responsibilities.

One aspect, however, is to make professional continuing education for librarians an integral part of university library development and another is to pursue concerted efforts aimed at its realization. It is in recognition of this observation that Aboyade [6] recommended that in order to promote continuing education of their staff, university librarians should take certain actions such as:

a) arranging to have regular professional meetings or training sessions within their libraries;

b) sponsoring their staff for relevant courses whenever they are available;

c) granting periodic study leaves;

d) rewarding those who undertake further studies with promotion or an increment in salary, especially if they display superior or improved skills as a result of some further education.

Such opportunities should be on ground before any meaningful discussion on professional continuing education for the category of librarians can take place.

PROFESSIONAL CONTINUING EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Continuing education for librarians in Nigerian university libraries usually takes place through refresher courses, on-the-job training, conferences, workshops, seminars or in-service training.

Refresher Courses

A refresher course is a training course in which librarians improve their knowledge or skills and learn about new developments relating to the jobs they do. Quite often, refresher courses are organised periodically in Nigeria by the librarians’ professional association - the Nigerian Library Association and its branches in each of the thirty six states of the federation including Abuja, the capital city. At these courses, academic and non-academic librarians usually participate as trainers during which written tests are sometimes conducted and certificates of attendance awarded to participants at the end of the training sessions. The duration of these courses range from a week to three months and the beneficiaries are largely para-professionals and support staff of university libraries.

Seminars

Seminars provide opportunities to a group of academic librarians who meet to discuss problems or topical issues on recent developments in Nigerian library scene. These are usually organised by the Nigerian Library Association, University Consults as well as a conglomeration of people interested in librarianship from time to time. The basic objective of these seminars on libraries is to improve efficiency of librarians in various academic libraries where they work.

Several notable seminars organised by different bodies in Nigeria in the past include: Seminar on Nigerian University Library Standards: by CULNU from 30th - 31st October 1981 at the University of Maiduguri; National Seminar on Anglo American Cataloguing Rule II (AACR II) organised by Cataloguing and Classification Section of the NLA from 19th - 23rd May, 1981 at Ilorin; Seminar on Indexing Services: Principles and Practices, with special focus on their relevance in Nigeria organised by NLA between 23rd-25th of July 1984; Seminar on University Library Architecture organised by The Committee of University Librarians of Nigerian Universities (CULNU) at the Institute of Education Conference Room, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, between 30th-31th of May 1980 ; and Seminar on Improving Services in Academic/Research Libraries in Nigeria through Practical Cooperative System organised by Academic and Research Libraries Section of NLA from 28th September to 1st October 1990.
Workshops

A workshop on a particular subject, involves discussion and practical work on that subject by a group of academic and professional librarians. Well organised workshops enable librarians in university libraries to acquire practical training on some knotty issues in their profession. According to Adelabu [7], special workshops on a single problem allow greater subject expansion and greater learning opportunities. They are the shortcut to knowledge, if well organised and topic focused.

Amongst several workshops organised for the purpose of professional continuing education for librarians in the country include: 4th Seminar Workshop on Library Management: Heading and Managing Libraries organised by the NLA and the University of Benin Library held at the University of Benin Library Ugbowo Campus, Benin City between 25th-29th October 1992 as well as Workshop on Documentation Restoration in Libraries, Archives, Documentation and Information Centres in Nigeria organised by the Department of Library Studies, University of Ibadan at the University of Ibadan Conference Centre from 8th-10th September, 1992. On the international scene, The 14th IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) African Workshop on Micro-computer Applications for Library Managers was held at Gimpa, Accra, Ghana between 5th-13th February, 1995. The workshops offered some Nigerian university librarians, who were hitherto computer illiterates to have basic training on the use of computers for library routines.

Conferences

A conference is a meeting that often lasts for a few days where a group of librarians meet to discuss on a particular topic or a shared interest in librarianship. Although conferences and workshops are for the same basic objective of facilitating professional continuing education for librarians in Nigeria, they differ in their training approach. While a conference emphasises on an in-depth discussion of a subject matter, a workshop handles it theoretically and practically. Because of their nature, conferences are more frequently organised than workshops in Nigeria. Some of the most important conferences organised on libraries in the country so far are Nigerian Library Association's Annual General Conference held at Baguada Lake Hotel Kano between 2nd-6th December 1990 during which Planning and Developing Libraries in the 80's was discussed; Annual Conference of the NLA held at the Conference Centre of the University of Ibadan between 4th-8th December, 1983 with a discussion of Twenty one years of Library Service in Nigeria; Annual General Meeting (AGM) and Conference of the NLA held at Ilorin between 11th-15th September 1992 on Universal Data-flows and Telecommunications (UDT); Annual General Conference of the NLA held at Yola International Hotel, Yola, Gongola (now Adamawa) State from 12th-16th March 1990 on Preservation and Conservation of Library, Archival and Museum Materials; and National Conference and Annual General Meeting of the NLA held at Arewa House, Kaduna between 5th-9th May 1997 with a discussion on Funding Libraries.

On-the-job Training

Training is a continuous exercise for academic librarians during their normal working lives. That is to say that they are benefitted from continuing education provided by work situations albeit, subconsciously. A university library, for example, runs the risk of disorganising its catalogue if a new recruit is given a free hand to catalogue and classify some of its materials without going through the tutelage of an experienced cataloguer. The new recruit has to be made to work alongside others in the workroom to enable him to acquire practical knowledge of all the theories he has learnt through his formal education. This experience is the 'on-line-job training' or continuing education necessary for the recruit to skillfully handle various activities.

In-service Training

As part of their manpower development strategies, Nigerian universities usually make provision for retraining of all categories of staff in their annual budgets. Librarians in Nigerian university libraries benefit from the provision as they sometimes receive training for higher degrees under their universities’ in-service training programmes. Tertiary institutions that train librarians for higher degrees in Nigeria include The Department of
Library Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan (1959), The Department of Library Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (1968), The Department of Library Science, University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri (1978), The Department of Library Science, Bayero University, Kano (1977), Library Studies Unit, Imo State University, Okigwe (1981), The Department of Library Science, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (1983), The Department of Library Science, Abia State University, Uturu (1989). The curriculum of these library schools are similar and standard enough to equip matured student librarians with advanced further training for their profession and areas of specialization. Presently, the core curriculum of library schools offering courses leading to postgraduate degrees in library science includes [8] library organisation and administration, selection and acquisition, cataloguing and classification, reference and bibliography and special types of libraries like public, school, university and special libraries. These subjects are being taught in a comparative manner with the libraries of Great Britain forming the background, and libraries and librarianship in Africa being used as examples.

PROBLEMS OF PROFESSIONAL CONTINUING EDUCATION

In spite of the aforementioned numerous opportunities available for professional librarians in Nigerian universities, they have failed to make the most of them as a result of the several problems. There include:

Lack of Funds

With dwindling finances of Nigerian universities, occasioned by economic recession and the poor face value of the Naira since late 1980s, funds made available by the National Universities Commission for capital and recurrent expenditures have been grossly inadequate for the provision of basic facilities in these institutions. In this situation, universities with feasible strategic plans hardly embark on new capital projects but rather focus their attention on paying staff salaries. In this general financial difficulty, attendance at conferences, workshops, seminars and other long and short term training courses is of secondary importance, and the popular executive comment most of the times on training request is ‘approved subject to availability of fund’. Thus a study fellowship approved for an individual may not be effective as long as shortage of funds for it persists.

Apathetic Attitude of Chief Librarians Towards Continuing Education

Some university librarians with their staff having the pre-requisite qualifications for working in university libraries are usually reluctant to send these staff members for further training. While a few others restrict continuing education of staff to attendance at learned conferences, workshops and seminars with affordable fees only. It is to be remembered that, as pointed out earlier in the study, training is a continuous process for staff if the overall effectiveness and efficiency of university libraries are to be guaranteed.

Delays in the Remuneration of Beneficiaries

Delays in the remuneration of beneficiaries of continuing education are a major obstacle to the scheme. Aguolu has also observed that there is inadequate reward system as promotions take too long to come by after further training. The demotivation resulting from stagnation in social and/or economic statuses of beneficiaries usually slows down rather than improve their productivity in Nigerian university libraries.

Inadequate Training Facilities

Facilities for professional continuing education for librarians available in Nigerian library schools as well as those presented by training agencies are inadequate. Again, because of the ailing Nigerian economy and the dwindling departmental budgets in Nigerian universities, some of the library schools that offer post-graduate training in librarianship have no designated training workshops, computers, cataloguing and books selection tools, just to mention a few, that are needed for practicals, group discussions and assignments; yet they turn out librarians with specialization in library automation, cataloguing and classification, collection development, indexing and abstracting, etc. Training agencies such as the Nigerian Library Association and University Consults do not help the matter either. They also provide obsolete and inadequate training tools like manually operated
overhead projectors, outdated computers and even half-baked trainers at seminars/workshops.

Wrong Societal Perception of Library Profession

In spite of its professional traits - formation of a named professional association (NLTA), governmental recognition, formulation of ethical rules, etc. - librarianship in Nigeria is still battling with wrong societal perception of its image besides the sagging morale of practitioners. Librarianship is perceived as a low-rated and poorly remunerated profession. Its members are also viewed as mere selectors and organisers of books by the layman. To worsen the matter, the professional body of the librarians, the NLTA, was established on the 16th of December 1962 only to be accorded official recognition by government on the 15th of June 1995, over after three decades. The wrong perception of the profession by the society, coupled with its delayed recognition by government results into a serious psychological problem i.e. inferiority complex among librarians to the extent that some able-bodied young men and women in the profession not only lost interest in professional continuing education for librarians but also sought for and pursued higher degrees in lucrative disciplines even at their own expense.

PROSPECT OF CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR LIBRARIANS IN NIGERIA

The prospect of professional continuing education for librarians in Nigeria is bright if the Federal Military Government will continue to adopt measures that will facilitate the process. Recognising the dearth of essential educational materials in Nigerian University Libraries, the Federal Government took a loan from the World Bank in 1989 to cushion the terrible effect of dearth of books, journals and equipment on the academic activities in all the federal universities in Nigeria minus the University of Abuja. This great gesture was not restricted to provision of educational materials alone and a few librarians were trained in overseas library schools with the World Bank Loan in order to facilitate their continuing education. Lately, the Petroleum (Special) Task Fund has indicated its intention to refurbish some of the infrastructural facilities in Nigerian Universities. With this development one can only hope that the organisation (PTF) will also extend the refurbishing activities to further training of librarians in Nigerian University Libraries too.

The worrisome issue of non-recognition of the NLTA by the government was finally laid to rest when on 15th of June 1995, the Federal Military Government [10] finally decreed that:

There is hereby established a body to be known as the Librarians (Registration, etc). Council of Nigeria.

By this official declaration, librarianship became a recognised profession in Nigeria. Thus from this vantage point, the Nigerian Library Association can now monitor the continuing education of its members effectively.

With the current trend in information technology and the fact that some of the patrons of the Nigerian university libraries are computer literate, more emphasis will however have to be paid to further training of librarians in computerization of library services in the near future. Although majority of the librarians (with a first degree in library science) working in Nigerian university libraries have had sound theoretical training in library automation in their former library schools, this will be insufficient to meet information needs of some of their sophisticated users. The curriculum of some of the library schools offering higher degrees in librarianship should be redesigned in such a way that librarians are exposed to advanced practical training in information storage, retrieval and dissemination with the use of computers. Similarly organisers of conferences, workshops and seminars should ensure that topical issues such as library budgeting and staff motivation are addressed in future activities. Librarians need continuing education on budgetary allocation among competing projects in a recessed economy as well as modern techniques of motivating all categories of library staff for operational efficiency.

CONCLUSION

The paper highlights the necessity and opportunities for professional continuing education for librarians in Nigerian university libraries. It emphasizes that despite some of the obstacles to continuing education of this category of librarians,
the prospect for the exercise is bright if the
government will continue to support efforts aimed
at promoting the cause and image of librarianship
in Nigeria.

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