

The State of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Nigerian University Libraries: The Experience of Ibrahim Babangida Library, Federal University of Technology, Yola

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Introduction

Information and Communication Technology (ICT), is a composite term, which embodies three important concepts. To understand ICT, one must understand all three concepts.

“Information” means many things to many people, depending on the context. Scientifically, information is processed data. Information can also be loosely defined as that which aids decision making. Information, though abstract, could also be visualized as a commodity, which could be bought or sold. Other writers have defined information as:

Any potentially useful fact, quantity or value that can be expressed uniquely with exactness. Information is whatever is capable of causing a human mind to change its opinion about the current state of the real world (de watteville and Gilbert 2000)

Communication refers to the transfer or exchange of information from person to person or from one place to another. When action produces a reaction, whether positive or negative, communication has taken place. Other writers in the field of communication studies have defined communication as:

...a process: a transfer of information, ideas, thoughts and messages. It involves a sender, a receiver, a code and, a language that is understood by both the sender and the receiver.

...a process involving the passing of messages through the use of symbols which all parties in the communication encounter understand. It involves the exchange of ideas, facts, opinions, attitudes and beliefs between people. It is not a one-way affair. There must be a sender to transmit the message, and receiver to make appropriate decisions on how the rest of the exchange should continue. (James, et al., 2004)

Technology refers to the use of scientific knowledge to invent tools that assist human beings in their efforts to overcome environmental hazards and impediments to comfort. In this regard, technology refers to the things like the computer, telephone, cell phone, GSM handsets, television, radio, etc.

Put together, therefore, ICT has been defined as:

The acquisition, analysis, manipulation, storage and distribution of information; and the design and provision of equipment and software for these purposes. (de watteville and Gilbert 2000)

ICT and Information Technology (IT) are similar concepts that can be used interchangeably. IT implies communication and therefore it becomes obvious that the two terms are synonymous.

Overview of the State of ICT in Nigerian University Libraries

Due to harsh economic conditions and government apathy to library development in Nigeria, the state of ICT in university libraries is mediocre. The literature affirms that quality of a university can be judged by the content and quality of the service offered by the library. Due to the same economic conditions and government apathy, the content and quality of services of most Nigerian university libraries have deteriorated to such a level that the quality of the products of such universities has also been adversely affected.

The National Universities Commission (NUC) set up a Quality Control Division (QCD) which did research to test the quality of Nigerian university academic programmes. The NUC set up benchmarks for each academic programme which were evaluated and scored based on the following criteria:

Criteria	Percent
Staffing	32
Academic Content	23
Physical Facilities	25
Library	12
Funding	05
Employers' Rating	03
Total	100

Academic programmes must have a score of 70 percent or above in each of the core areas of Staffing, Academic Content, Physical Facilities, and the Library in order to get full accreditation. The result of the 2005 NUC Accreditation Exercise was shocking. A total of 102 academic programmes (7.16%) were not only denied accreditation but also barred from admitting new students. 4 Programmes in universities that failed to get a score of 12 percent in the quality of library services were denied accreditation. NUC's prima facie case about the deteriorating quality of academic activities in Nigerian universities was made by the result of the 2005 accreditation exercise.

A close examination of those university libraries where the academic programmes were denied accreditation reveals that most do not have adequate ICT facilities. On the other hand, most of the libraries in which the programmes received full or interim accreditation had a functional Internet café, in addition to other ICT facilities.

The world has become so information conscious that people are no longer satisfied with paper- and print-based library services. An information revolution has threatened traditional library practices and

services. Librarians must embrace this revolution and participate actively and effectively in it in order to remain relevant, especially in universities. Ajayi (2003) says that:

The Information Revolution started a number of years ago and the impact all over the world has been tremendous. This revolution has brought about the convergence of information and communications technologies (ICT's), which have remained at the center of global social and economic transformations. The ICT sector is a gamut of industries and services – Internet service provision, telecommunications equipment and services, information technology (IT) equipment and services, media and broadcasting, libraries and documentation centers, commercial information providers, network-based information services and other related information and communication activities.

A cogent example of the impact of the information revolution on the university library is the teaching of a "Use of the Library" course. This course, which was aimed at marketing the library and teaching students how to use it effectively, is being phased out in some Nigerian universities. At the Federal University of Technology (FUTY), for instance, the course has been replaced by Information Literacy. Students and lecturers in the universities no longer need the "how to use of the library" course, they need an Information Literacy course. With Information Literacy, they can go to the Internet to obtain information on their own. Students and staff in universities also no longer need the traditional, non-ICT-literate librarian.

Ajakaye (2004), decries the cumbersome, time-wasting and rigid policies and practices of the traditional libraries and librarians, saying that:

In the libraries, a patron undergoes a rigorous training on the cataloguing system, meets most times in the Nigerian libraries, a rather disinterested looking officials, spends more than half hour looking for the only book available, gets to know later that it had been borrowed, or even gets the book only to discover that some very relevant portions have been made away with. In the Internet, the same material is available to several different users at the same minute, same second, same hour worldwide. The truth, which it cannot be disproved, is that with the Internet, a lot more fresh ideas are available to the students or the researcher than any library could handle.

With the installation of the ICT in the library, there will be simultaneous access for many people at the same time, and library users will have self-service to replace the unreliable service they may have received from library staff. Any university library without a functional ICT connectivity will eventually become extinct and obsolete. Ajayi (2003) observes that:

Any industry that sidelines ICT has simply signed a "death warrant" on its continued relevance. The library represents one area that has experienced this revolution. The fact that we live in knowledge based society with the need for universal access has made it necessary for the library to redefine its role and mode of service delivery. The traditional "brick and mortar" libraries need to give way to libraries that are not limited by geography. It is essential for libraries to reinvent themselves if they hope to develop and facilitate access to information in this digital age.

ICT is the *sine qua non* for effective modern library management and services. Aina (2004) asserts:

Information and communication technology (ICT) has radically transformed most of the services provided by a library. ICT is heavily utilized in the storage, processing and dissemination of information. It has made the organization of information very efficient, the delivery of basic information services more effective and the dissemination of information to users easier. It has eliminated a lot of routine and repetitive tasks in a library. ICT is now a core component of any

library and information science curriculum at all levels. Any modern library and information professional must be knowledgeable in library automation, networking, Internet surfing, database management processing software, statistical software, etc.

It is gratifying to note that most university libraries in Nigeria have embraced ICT. It is also fair to say that ICT architecture (hardware) can be found in every university library in Nigeria, though in varying degrees. Internet connectivity can be found in most university libraries in Nigeria. The number and quality of computer-literate librarians and library staff are not adequate, however. ICT requires money for acquisition, installation, maintenance, training, and sustainability. Many Nigerian university libraries do not have funds to venture and sustain ICT. The federal government of Nigeria has ICT plans and policies for the country that have yet to materialize. The National Policy on Information Technology has a mission statement that says:

To make Nigeria an IT capable country in Africa and a key player in the Information Society by the year 2005, using IT as the engine for sustainable development and global competitiveness.

According to the policy, the government will set up and develop a national information infrastructure "backbone" as the gateway to the Global Information Infrastructure (GII) and create state and local area networks. This policy is to be implemented through the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA). As stated in the IT policy, by 2005 Nigeria was to become "an IT capable country in Africa." We are now already into the year 2008; can we say that Nigeria is a capable IT country? To put it plainly, Nigeria is not yet an average ICT country in Africa. The desire is there, the awareness has been created, but the will power to budget sufficient funds to propel the ICT wheel of progress has been lacking. If Nigeria is not yet an average IT country, her university libraries cannot be any better.

Another problem militating against the development of ICT in university libraries is the negative, laissez-faire attitude of lecturers, students, and even librarians. These people feel that the government or their employers should train them in ICT. This is a very wrong conception and belief. Aina (2004), while admitting the high cost of ICT training, says librarians must do something:

Given the fact that the cost of training is enormous and only few employers could afford to send staff on training on a regular basis, there should be the possibility of improving, one's career from ones work place.

Downtown and roadside computer schools, business centers, and cybercafés now exist in the major towns and cities of Nigeria, with facilities for training in ICT.

The State of ICT at the FUTY Library

The FUTY was established in 1981 as one of the seven Federal Universities of Technology set up as a result of the change in national education policy regarding technological self-reliance. The library, which took off in a temporary building in 1982, now occupies a two-story building that can accommodate 50,000 volumes of books, 100 titles of journals, 750 readers, and 50 staff. The collection now stands at over 40,000 volumes, with 56 titles of foreign journals, 48 titles of local journals, and a total of 12 local newspapers. The library has staff strength of 8 academic, chartered librarians and 36 supporting staff.

Through the efforts of the management, ICT development has flourished at the university. The University has three Internet cafés with state-of-the-art equipment, the best and biggest which is the library café. Connectivity from the library café has been extended to the administrative block to serve as the nucleus for the campus ICT network. Each of the three Internet cafés has a standby generator in case of public power outages.

The library ICT project began with the establishment of the LAN and Internet connectivity, using a dial-up system in 2002. Each division of the library was connected to the Internet through the dial-up system. Due to the high cost of telephone bills, a V-SAT was installed in the library in 2003, and a space provided to serve as the Internet café. Provision of computers became a problem but, thanks to Education Trust Fund (ETF), the problem was solved. Internet access was slow until a new V-SAT with a dedicated bandwidth was installed in 2005.

The university administration was well disposed to ICT and academic excellence, and paid for access to EbscoHost. This has enabled the library to offer Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) service to the academic community. The library is able to download current journal articles for the learning, teaching, and research needs of the academic staff and students.

In terms of training for ICT, FUTY has been in the forefront. FUTY was the first university in Nigeria to offer degree courses in ICT. The Department of Information Technology has ICT-compliant staff with a computer laboratory. Unesco has established a professorial chair in ICT for FUTY, which is yet to be occupied, although the position has been advertised. The university has an aggressive staff-training programme especially for ICT courses. While the senior library staff are sponsored for degree courses in library science and information technology, the junior staff are also sponsored for similar courses at the diploma level.

The university has a Central ICT Committee on which the library is represented. Admissions are now posted on the website. Efforts are underway to post exam results on the FUTY website and for students to register and pay fees online at the beginning of the academic session.

The Ibrahim Babangida Library (the main library) is one of the six pilot sites selected for the Unesco Virtual Library project. The library is also one of the eleven university libraries earmarked by NUC for the National Virtual Library Project. As a result of these developments, some of the library staff, as well other as academic staff of FUTY have attended training workshops organized by NUC, Unesco, AGORA, ETF and NITDA.

The FUTY library has embraced ICT in its services. Catalogue cards are now produced by computer. FUTYLIS, locally developed software, is being used to prepare the library's OPAC. This is to be replaced by the more comprehensive ALICE FOR WINDOWS Software in order to completely offer online services. Out of the eight academic librarians, six are computer/Internet-literate. The library has seven computer operators.

Suggestions

- NUC should implement, as soon as possible, its proposal to sponsor university librarians to tour university libraries in the USA and UK. This will enable librarians to be exposed to the ways in which ICT is used in offering modern library services.
- ETF should implement one of its terms of reference, which makes it a duty to sponsor short training courses abroad for librarians, especially in ICT.
- ETF should assist academic staff of Nigerian universities to publish books.
- The government should increase funding to Nigerian universities, in order to implement the National ICT Policy.
- Librarians should not wait for the government or employers to train them in ICT. They should be self-reliant by paying for their basic training in ICT, at least on a part-time basis.
- The government should exempt ICT equipment from customs and excise tax so that the prices of such equipment will be drastically reduced and become affordable.
- The government should set up powerful V-SATs and pay for adequate size of bandwidth in all federal and state tertiary institutions.

- Academic staff of universities should be provided with PCs and/or Laptops in order to influence learning, teaching, and research.
- Nigerian universities like FUTY that offer degree courses in ICT should insist on computer literacy as one of the conditions for admission. Experience has shown that teaching ICT to students who are computer illiterate is akin to dancing without music.

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