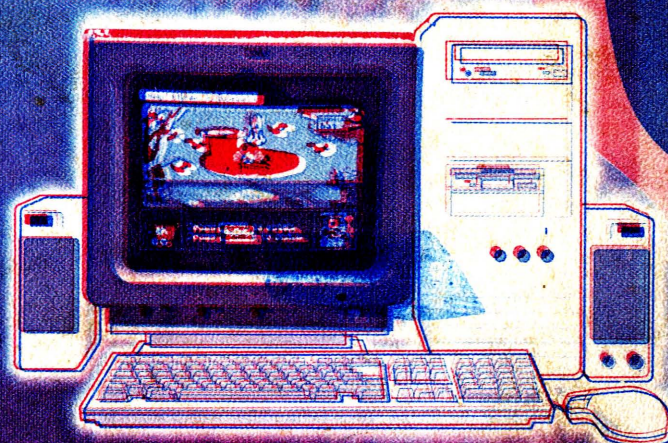
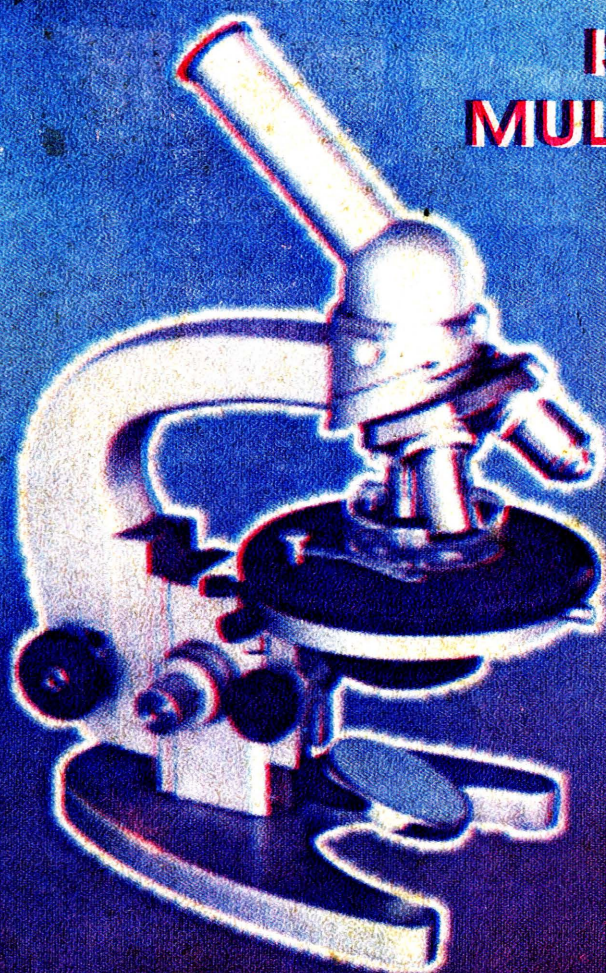


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CHALLENGES TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY SERVICES' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The paper itemizes the challenges besetting Nigerian university system which include university autonomy, secret cult, lack of expertise in information and communication technology, privatisation and attitude of the academia. It relates them to how they affect the library services. Recommendations and a conclusion are given.

Introduction

University education in Nigeria started with the University College, Ibadan and blossomed from 1960, when the first indigenous university, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka admitted her maiden students. It dwindled during the civil war and started flourishing again in 1970. In 1979, Rivers State government pioneered the establishment of state universities (NUC, 1995). Currently, private universities have sprung up.

Universities are beset with a plethora of challenges. While some of them are not intractable, others seem to have defied any solution. Prominent among them are university autonomy, cultism/secret cult, lack of expertise in information and communication technology, privatisation and attitude of the academia.

University Autonomy and Lack of Funds Syndrome

Federal government's intention for university autonomy came to the limelight in 1999 when the National Universities Commission (NUC) secretary, Professor Jibril advocated for the deregulation of funding universities to allow them charge tuition fees. He stated that Nigerian universities should be encouraged to generate funds for their operations, while government would pay salaries alone, Jibril (1999). It was reiterated in 2000 by the Minister of Education, Adeniran (2000). Onyekwelu (2000) also assured that university autonomy would not lead to increase in university fees. The FRN/ASUU agreement of 2001 on university autonomy did not proffer any solution for a situation where a federal university become insolvent. In spite of assurances given by government and NUC functionaries, universities are plagued with financial distress.

As a result of financing crisis, the University of Ibadan had placed all its staff on half salary, (Sotunde and Oyekanmi, 2002). The university has also laid off over 400 workers including 46 academic staff. In reaction to the unfortunate development, the National Universities Commission (NUC) secretary said:

In the spirit of university autonomy, the institutions authorities were at liberty to handle the situation as they deem fit (Sotunde and Oyekanmi, 2002:96).

Implications for the Library Services

The impact of this dispensation is that cost cutting in the running of the library services and staff emolument cannot be ruled out. Purchase of very essential but costly journals and books would be shelved. Competent and dedicated academic librarians may look for greener pastures. This may lead to a decline in information provision and delivery.

Secret Cult in University Campuses

The terror that secret cult has unleashed to rival groups boggles the mind. In 1979, ninety (90) students of Edo State University were expelled in connection with secret cult activities.

The University of Nigeria, Nsukka was closed in July 2002 as a result of blood-letting crises between rival secret cult groups, in which lives were lost. Hence, academic programmes and schedules in various universities are being disrupted because of clandestine activities of secret cults.

Implications for the Library Services

As a result of series of nocturnal meetings and unwholesome extracurricular activities, cult members do not have enough time for their academic work. Whenever they find any thesis in the library that is related or relevant to their assignment, they normally devise devious tricks to hoodwink the library staff, and either photocopy the contents (which is a lawless act), smuggle it out of the library, or rip off some of its pages. If the trend is not checked, the library's function as a repository of knowledge and information could be seriously jeopardized.

Lack of Expertise in Information and Communication Technology

Information and communication technologies (ICT) is a term which encompasses all computer based systems, from CD-ROMS to telecommunication systems such as teleconferencing, video conferencing and the internet with its worldwide web (WWW) (NUC, 1999). If universities have to achieve their primary responsibilities of teaching, research and public service, recognition should be given to effective information dissemination and storage. It is in this connection that the ICT becomes relevant. The National Universities Commission had connected many federal universities with each other through the Nigerian University Network (NUNET) system and all the universities connected with NUNET have acquired E-mail services which enable them to send and receive messages from any part of the world (Jibril, 1999).

Implications for the Library Services

ICT suffers some setbacks because of lack of well-trained manpower to man and maintain it. The university libraries which are imbued with the responsibility of management of information in all its ramifications should be skillful in the use of ICT. However, many of them do not have Online Public Access Catalogues (OPACs) and workstations for their readers. The Internet connectivity initiated by NUC is not functional in some libraries.

Privatization

Privatisation involves the transfer of ownership and control of public enterprises to the private sector (Obadan, 2000). The sale may be 100 percent or less of the specified assets of the state or shares in designated public enterprise (Obadan, 2000). The privatization of public enterprises (P.Es) hinges on the neoclassical hypothesis that private ownership brings greater efficiency and more rapid growth. In the transition countries, the evidence of good results has come mainly from Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. However, evidence from further East-Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Mongolia, Russia and Ukraine shows less promising results (Obadan, 2000).

Utilities to be Privatized and Their Phases

- (a) Phase 1 – (to be completed by December, 1999) include: Commercial and Merchant Banks and Cement plants that are already quoted on the stock exchange.

- (b) Phase II – to include Hotels and Motor Vehicle Assembly plants.
- (c) Phase III – to include NEPA, NITEL, NAFCON, Nigeria Airways and Petroleum Refineries (FNR, 2000:6).

Objectives of the First and Second Round Privatisation Programmes in Nigeria

- (a) To restructure and rationalize the public sector in order to lesson the dominance of unproductive investments in the sector.
- (b) To re-orientate the enterprises for privatisation towards a new horizon of performance improvement, viability and overall efficiency.
- (c) To raise funds for financing socio-economic developments in such areas as health, education and infrastructure.
- (d) To initiate the process of gradual cession to the private the sector of such PEs which are better operated by the private sector.
- (e) To create more jobs, acquire new knowledge and technology, and expose the country to international competition (FRN, 2000:47).

Impact of Privatisation of Some Public Utilities on University Library Services

Generally, it should be recalled that Nigeria's foreign debt stood at \$28.4 billion as at 2001, (Aminu, Famakinwa, Obike, Oduniyi, Olaleye and Ona, 2002). Further external borrowing as suggested by Howard could depress the economy and possibly cause more devaluation and consequent inflation. The inflationary trend will adversely affect acquisition of library materials as fewer materials could be purchased with the allocated fund.

National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) and NITEL

NEPA is the source of power on which library services, such as OPACs, library automation, E-mail and internet connectivity revolve. For NITEL, telephone lines are central to the services rendered through E-mail. Any situation that disrupts library services due to its inability to settle NEPA and/or NITEL bills during or after privatisation will have a deleterious effect on information generation and delivery.

Nigeria Airways

Any increase in air fare and freighting will limit, if not forestall, the chances of any academic staff including librarians, of benefiting from the FGN/ASUU agreement of 1999 which stipulated that:

Each university shall fully fund at least one local learned conference per year and one international conference every five years for each academic staff (FGN/ASUU, 1999:11).

Conference papers contribute to academic excellence. These papers are normally collected, classified and kept in the university libraries for general use.

Attitudes of The Academia

(a) Sale of Handouts and Books

In spite of a directive making the purchase of handouts and books published by lecturers optional (UNN, 1998), lecturers do not abide by it. They retain the books borrowed from the library which they find very useful in preparing their handouts and books as long as they wish. They also

disregard recall and overdue notices sent to them. Information in such texts/materials is therefore not widely circulated.

- (b) Resenting being required to participate in book selection and regarding it as a librarian's job, sometimes lead to non-availability of some relevant materials on specialized topics in university libraries.
- (c) **Imperfect Teaching of Use of Library**
Use of Library as a component of G.S. courses is not taught by academic or professional librarians in some universities. Students therefore graduate without imbibing the essentials of library culture and are therefore unable to carry out bibliographic searching when admitted to do postgraduate studies. This handicap sometimes leads to plagiarism.
- (d) Poor maintenance of the library catalogue and poor shelf-reading make it difficult for readers to get the materials they need from the library stock. Thus, the library's information potential is not fully expected.
- (e) Shoddy behaviour of some academic staff leaves much to be desired. Some of them aid and abet corruption and examination mal-practices, while a few others give tacit consent to their children's membership of a secret cult.

Conclusion

Challenges which beset Nigerian university system are hydra-headed but they are not insurmountable. They should not be avoided because they task our ingenuity and elicit the best reaction to issues in any individual, institution or society. These positive reactions could be harnessed and channelled towards achieving a more peaceful and stable environment.

Recommendations

The federal government should address the issues of funding the universities during the autonomy with respect to salvaging the financially distressed ones. Re-introduction of payment of moderate tuition fees in federal universities is advocated.

Secret cults should be abrogated in higher institutions. Students who are caught as cult members should be expelled and denied any admission into any higher institution. They and their patrons should be sentenced accordingly.

There is need for aggressive re-training of university staff in the use of information and communication technology (ICT). This is particularly pertinent in the library. The library and information science department's curricula should be revolutionized to reflect present realities. Theoretical knowledge should be complemented with pragmatic approach with respect to ICT. The federal government could assist university lecturers with soft loans/subsidies to acquire computers and internet access as in the induction programme in Turkey, Chile and Sweden (World Bank, 2002).

Privatization should be pursued with caution. The case of public utilities like NEPA, NITEL, Nigeria Airways and petroleum refineries could be reviewed, commercialized and made to be self-sustaining.

These should be on enforceable law preventing the sale of/compulsory purchase by students of handouts and books published by the lecturers in the universities. The law which makes it mandatory for every author to deposit a copy of his published book in the library should be re-enacted and enforced. There is urgent need for moral regeneration in the universities, since the adage in "Ivory Towers", which cherishes, "... to be found worthy in *Character and Learning*..." no longer holds, especially with respect to the former.

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