

The Prospects of Electronic Information Networks in Nigerian Polytechnic Libraries

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Abstract

Funding has been a major problem towards effective library services in Nigeria polytechnics. Different intervention programmes from international organisations and national agencies have made very little impact. To reposition the libraries, this paper suggests the shifting of emphasis from acquisition of hard copies of documents to access through the connection of the polytechnic information network (PINET).

Introduction

Over the years technical education has contributed in no small measures to the socio-economic growth of Nigeria. The crucial role of technical education was recognized more with the establishment of Yaba Technical Institute (now Yaba College of Technology in 1948. This was a landmark to the foundation of polytechnic education in Nigeria. The period 1970-1980, witnessed the proliferation of polytechnics with the enactment of Decree No 33 of 1979 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1980). The Decree gave birth to another tier of Nigerian higher education – the polytechnics. The first generation polytechnics, established by the Decree, are those in Akure, Bauchi, Bida, Idah, Ilaro, Yaba and Yola.

According to the Decree, the function of the polytechnics shall include:

1. to provide full and part-time courses of instructions and training in technology applied sciences, commerce and management; and such other field of applied learning relevant to the needs of the development of Nigeria in the area of industrial and agricultural production and distribution and for research in the development.
2. to arrange conferences, seminars and study relative to the field of learning specified in '1' above and

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3. to perform such other functions as the opinion of the council may serve to promote the objectives of the polytechnic.

To fulfil these functions, libraries are set up to provide for the information needs of the polytechnics community. The National Policy and Education revised in 2004 has already recognized the roles of library in the educational development of the country. Thus it states:

Libraries are one of the most important educational services. Every state Ministry needs to provide funds (emphasis mine) for the establishment of libraries in all our educational institutions and to train librarians and library assistants for this service. (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2004)

Available statistics shows that there are more university students than polytechnic students in Nigeria. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2006), reports that Nigeria has 18,276 students in the polytechnics and 138,589 students in the universities.

Unfortunately poor funding has stifled the growth of libraries in the country. This has made it difficult for libraries to perform their roles in educational development of the country. Polytechnic libraries are among the worst funded academic libraries. (Chukwu, 1988). Okongwu (1986) had earlier lamented on the poor neglect of library development in Nigeria. According to him, the libraries in Nigeria are inadequate in terms of numbers, spread and acquisitions.

It is pertinent to note that this neglect has continued up till now. Comparatively, it appears that academic libraries are the most developed in Nigeria. However a survey conducted by UNESCO (1999) has debunked the claim. According to the survey, of the 41 universities, 41 polytechnics and 62 colleges of education in Nigeria, less than one percent of them have current journals, books titles and abstract in at least 80% of the programmes and disciplines they offer.

In almost all academic institutions in the country whenever there is a need for budget cut, the library is the first target. Aboi (1992) has suggested that 5% of the recurrent expenditure be allocated to the library in all academic institutions. However, the ugly development is that not only that the 5% is not allocated to the library, but also that the librarian has no control of the meagre amount the chief executives allocate to the library (Ishaya, 1998).

To worsen the situation all the intervention programmes by international organizations and national agencies have not been able to mitigate the problem. According to Uwachie (1996) and Hamza (1996), the World Bank credit facility for the development of academic libraries in the 1990s was a success apart from the problems associated with delay in delivery of consignment, lack of fund to procure processing materials or delivered consignments etc.

In the Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF) intervention efforts in the late 1990s, observers revealed that the programme was a failure. It was highly politicized hence book vendors were contracted to acquire books without considering the needs of each library. Analysts are watching the intervention programme of Education Tax Fund (ETF) with keen interest as it leads towards the drain.

For economy of funds in academic libraries, inter-library co-operation has been suggested by a number of scholars. According to them, inter-library co-operation is a very viable approach in document delivery system. However, in developing country such as Nigeria, inter-library co-operation has not been able to create much impact because of a lot of constraints identified by Odini (1991). Some of the constraints according to Odini (1999) are lack of national policy on information and library development, the high inflation rate which affects library acquisition, poor infrastructure development, among others. Thus inter-library co-operation has not helped much in development of academic library in the country.

Since some of these efforts have not helped much in mitigating the problems of academic library development in Nigeria, it becomes certain that an alternative approach to save polytechnic libraries is adopted. With the development of modern information technology that is computer and telecommunication technologies, emphasis on document delivery system has shifted from acquisitions to access (Molholt, 1987). Therefore, the most important thing for a researcher is access to information from widely dispersed sources through an appropriate media. This is where electronic information network calls for attention.

Electronic information network is the use of computer and telecommunication facilities to store and retrieve information from different locations. Adams (1995) has argued that electronic information network has opened up a new vista to African researchers, academics, and students as well as technocrats. According to him, Africa will drive a lot of benefits through electronic information network.

Polytechnic libraries can exploit this opportunity provided by information technology in the present information age. Fall (1996) and Adams (1997) in their studies have argued that African countries are already embracing the current information and communication technology. This has been corroborated by Teferra (2004) and Gbaje (2007). Therefore, the problem of infrastructural development may have been taken care of.

Strategies for development of electronic information networks among Nigerian Polytechnics

Access to electronic information requires effective and appropriate infrastructures, access opportunities and services which are lacking in most African countries particularly Nigeria. Adam (1997) recognized this problem and suggested the following steps to improve electronic access to information.

- Provision of qualitative elementary, secondary and tertiary education.
- Improvement of literacy rates amongst adults
- Improvement in computer literacy programmes by fostering private involvement and creating enabling environment.

- Using information and communication technology in teaching and learning processes.
- Advancing the value of information by sensitizing management and users in the information culture and by demonstrating the impacts of information and communication technologies on the community.

The development of electronic information networks among polytechnics libraries therefore, will involve the following key initiatives.

(1) Development of local-based information system within each Polytechnic

As noted earlier, Africans in general and Nigerians in particular are embracing information technologies such as computers and telecommunication. It is thus necessary that Nigerian polytechnics shift emphasis from white elephant projects to mainstream computerization of their libraries and other departments in these institutions. This will provide adequate management of polytechnic community.

The management of polytechnics in this country should make this a priority project since no organisation can perform effectively without embracing information technology. Much of the resources from Education Tax Fund (ETF) should be channelled to project like that, so that the required infrastructure would have been developed.

(2) Training of manpower

Most employers of labour in Nigeria have paid lip services to manpower development. Polytechnic librarians are the worst hit. Apparently, information management techniques change with time. Similarly new technologies evolve almost on a daily basis. Bearing these in mind, librarians should be sponsored to local and international workshops, conferences and seminars to expose them to modern techniques in information management. In addition to these, management of the Nigeria polytechnics should sponsor librarians to short courses where they will be trained in the use of information technologies in library operations. Such courses may be organized in a form of train the trainer basis to minimize cost. With adequate human resources development in the libraries; the handling of and even maintenance of acquired information technology equipment will be ensured.

(3) Translation of indigenous language documents

Several research materials rendered in Nigerian indigenous languages exist in many polytechnic libraries. These materials lack wider readability because of language barriers. It is imperative that some of these materials are translated in languages that will appeal to international audience, after which they will be digitized and uploaded into the library data base. This will assist Nigeria polytechnic libraries to globalize their local contents when they are uploaded to the Internet.

(4) Content development

The library at this stage is expected to update the stock of the library in digital form. Each section of the library such as circulation, serials, cataloguing, branch libraries (in large libraries) and departmental libraries should have their stocks in the computer. Information resources in the library such as Nigeria publications, government publications, popular culture information, travel and tourism information, sport information, students' projects, and current content of journal, abstracts and indexes should be stored in the computer. In addition, some of the departments in the polytechnic that have useful information for research purposes could also store them in the computer in their department ready for a local network

(5) Development of local network within Polytechnics

The management of different polytechnics should then make effort to connect the different sector of the library, the branch and departmental libraries into a network. With this form of local area network (LAN), different sections of the library, branch libraries and other departments can now access information through computer terminals. A librarian in the serials does not need to go to circulation to access a document there. When these have been completed, this very polytechnic library would have been ready for full participation in the Polytechnic Information Network, which will involve the entire polytechnics in the country.

(6) Linking up all the Polytechnic libraries in a National Network

The final stage in the programme should be the primary responsibility of the supervising body for Nigerian polytechnics - the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) or the proposed National Commission for Polytechnics. This body should take up the challenge of connecting all the polytechnics libraries into a form of electronic information network or what this paper will regard as PINET (Polytechnic Information Network). With this arrangement, resources of the polytechnic libraries in Nigeria will be shared among participating polytechnics electronically. In other words, a researcher in one part of the country need not travel to another part of the country to access the resources there. He does that from the library serving his own institution.

With this development, the Polytechnic Information Network (PINET) may likely want to join the global information super highway- the Internet. This will then offer unlimited opportunities for Nigerians researchers in our polytechnics. The issue of lack of research materials in our libraries would have been addressed.

Conclusive Remarks

Since funding has been the major impediment towards adequate library services in Nigeria polytechnics, it is imperative that efforts should be shifted from acquiring hard copies of

research material to accessibility to other libraries. Few available materials should be shared among polytechnic libraries through electronic information network. This will provide the necessary teaching and research materials, to students and researchers in participating polytechnics.

This will however be difficult without the polytechnics addressing the crucial problems of developing local-based information systems within the polytechnics, capacity building, local content development, developing local area networks in the polytechnics, translation of available local materials and finally linking up all the polytechnics into a network. These strategies would promote resource sharing electronically among Nigerian polytechnics. Above all, this effort may likely launch our polytechnics into the information super-highway – in particular, digitalisation of library resources, provision on-line library services and internet and WiFi connectivity. Needless to say, the achievement of this vision requires serious political will from government, regulatory agencies such as the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) and various stakeholders in Nigerian polytechnics. Library administrators equally have a lot to do to realise the desired objectives.

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