Information Literacy in the 21st Century Universities: The Kenyan Experience

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Abstract

Universities are expected to play a vital role in development issues of their countries and beyond as they engage in teaching, learning and research. The world-wide recognition of information as a key resource to the development of economies in the 21st century places even more responsibility on universities as they are looked upon as major consumers and creators of information touching on all sectors of the economy. Their contribution to develpoment therefore largely depends on how applicable the information they generate through research is relevant to the needs of their immediate communities; as well as on the quality of their graduates, and their contribution towards global information reserves. The introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) by the government of Kenya and its financial support to public secondary school students, coupled with the high demand for university education and high population growth are factors that have led to high ennrolments in the country's universities. On the other hand, the lack of a national policy on school libraries, the general lack of information literacy programmes in universities, high reliance on the lecture method and the reading-for-exams-only culture are inter-related issues that need to be tackled if the country is to benefit from quality teaching, learning and research. Based on brief literature reviews and the personal experiences through involvement of the author as a teacher-librarian and lecturer and Secretary, Kenya Library Association, this paper gives a general picture of information literacy-related activities in Kenyan universities; and efforts by some stakeholders towards encouragement, adoption and implementation of information literacy efforts in universities in Kenya. Suggestions on the way forward are given.

Key words: University Libraries - Kenya, Information Literacy

1.   Introduction

There are universal expectations of the role of universities in their communities and beyond. These expectations emanate from the core inter-twined functions of universities namely: teaching, learning, research and community service. As a result, it is argued that universities should be the economic engines for prosperity and growth as well as the centre-piece in nation-building and economic development. They act as drivers of economic and social development and help the "pull-through" from schools into production and private sectors. Their involvement in information creation, dissemination and preservation gives them a huge responsibility of ensuring human development as they carry out and document information and research findings touching on all sectors of the economy (Kenyatta University, 2006; UNESCO, 1998). However, it can also be argued that the success of the twenty first century university largely depends on how much quality, timely and relevant information its academic community is able to access and utilize, and how much the same community is able to

generate and contribute back into the global information and knowledge basket. This should include repackaging the same for consumption by not only their academic peers, but also end-users in other sectors of the economy including the common man or woman at the grassroots level.

The Kenyan government recognizes the role of information and Information Communication Technology (ICT) in socio-economic, political and technological development if it has to make strides in achieving the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs). Together with this is the recognition of the role of universities towards the country's development. This is spelt out in its blue print on National development, the Kenya Vision 2030, whose aim is ''…transforming Kenya into a newly industrializing middle-income country providing a high quality life to all its citizens in a clean and secure environment" (Republic of Kenya, 2007). It envisions the need to heavily invest in its universities, including ICTs. Ironically, government funding to public universities continues to reduce as the government injects more money in the Free Primary Education (FPE) initiative and subsidizes pubic secondary education (Mwiria, et al, 2007). In deed, a forward to conference proceedings for a regional conference titled The role of African universities in the attainment of MDGs, (Kenyatta University, 2006), laments the non-involvement of institutions of learning in deliberations or implementation of MDGs. On the other hand, high enrolment in universities in Kenya coupled with diversification of courses against reduced funding have led to questions about the quality of higher education in Kenya. Adoption and implementation of Information Literacy programmes supported with comensurate investment in the necessary human and other resources vital for effective teaching, learning and research will go a long way in helping Kenyan universities to positively contribute to the country's development as expected of any university all over the world.

1.1   Definition of Information Literacy

The American Library Association (ALA 2000) defines Information Literacy by giving a description of the abilities of an information literate person thus,

"To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. The information literate persons are those who have learned how to learn"

The Association gives a list of the competencies and skills to be associated with an information literate person thus,

- ♦   Determine the extent of information needed

- ♦   Access the needed information effectively and efficiently

- ♦   Evaluate information and its sources critically

- ♦   Incorporate selected information into ones knowledge base

- ♦   Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose; and,

- ♦   Understand the economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use of

In essence therefore, information literacy and life-long learning have a great influence on the quality of teaching, learning and research by university communities.

The 21st Century is described as an information and knowledge-intensive society. This follows a world-wide recognition of the vital role of information as a key factor of production for all economies (IFLA, 2006; Campbell, 2004). Hence, the debate about the 'information rich and the information poor'; 'the digital divide', 'information poverty' are issues that centre around the ability of individuals, groups, organizations and countries to access and maximally utilize the available information that is relevant to their local and global needs. This is because the identified differences between various groups in regard to these concepts relate more to their differences in undersatnding the value of information, which in itself, does not make people literate, but rather, as IFLA (2006) points out, information is:

- A vital element for creativity and innovation

- A key resource for learning and human thought

- A key resource in creating more knowledgeable citizens

- A factor that enables citizens to achieve better results in their academic lives, with regard to health, and at work

- An important resource for national socio-economic development

In essence therefore, a universities should be a place where information and ideas flow freely; and where truth is sort, disseminated and defended. The 21st century universities should re-evaluate their outcomes and investment priorities on the basis of attributes and qualities required of individuals to positively contribute to national and global development (Bundy). Equipping not only their students but the whole academic community with information literacy skills, and striving to carry research and offer evidence-based research findings for policy making regarding the need to offer information literacy skills to all citizens should be a key role of the 21st century university (Campbell, 2004). To achieve this, universities must be ready to invest in their libraries; and university libraries must be willing to play a major role in bridging the information divide through their commitment to equity of opportunity (IFLA, 2006, Bundy, 2003). Information professinals in these universities should thus strive to appreciate factors that are affecting library users, including but not limited to:

- proliferation of information and information sources

- Information overload that leaves users overwhelmed & frustrated; and hence the need for special skills to access and use information

- Changing user information seeking behaviors mostly caused by competition by other information providers as a result of information communication technology in information creation and dissemination

Having a workforce with the right competencies skills and attitudes, and that is ready to teach Information literacy to the academic communities they serve will go a long way in achieving this noble duty (ALA, 2000; Campbell, 2004).

1.2   Information Literacy in Kenyan Universities

A discussion of information literacy implementation in Kenyan universities can best be understood when contexualised within the whole education system in Kenya. The Kenyan government introduced Free Primary Education (FPE) in the year 2003; and subsidizes public secondary education charges. This has led to high enrolment rates at all levels. The current numbers are: 2,247,071 for pre-primary; 9,425,390 for primary and that of secondary school students at 1,796,467. (Republic of Kenya, 2010). The result has been rapid expansion of university education. The current number of universities in Kenya is 27: seven public universities with thirteen constituent colleges between them; eleven fully accredited private universities and nine private universities operating with a Letter of Interim Authority from the Commission for Higher Education (CHE, 2010). The 2009 census results gives the total number of university students in Kenyan universities at 198,119. Out of this, 100,649 are in public universities (Republic of Kenya, 2010).

The implication of these expansions on adoption and implementation of Information Literacy initiatives is enormous: Save for those who attend private schools with libraries, most primary and secondary school children in Kenya have no prior contact with libraries as they do not exist. The government's effort to provide books to public primary schools has not been successful as the books are still kept in book stores. Those who join universities get intimidated with the large university libraries. There is no national policy on Information Literacy, and Information literacy-related activities are thus individual institutional matters. However, most public universities offer Communication Skills course to their first year students. An earlier study by kavulya (2003) that sought to establish challenges facing implementation of information literacy efforts in Kenyan universities found that the Communication Skills course is taught by non-library staff and is characterized by large groups of students hence use of the lecture method due to lack of personnel; and there is a lack of eveluation of its effectiveness. The scenario has not changed much since this findings. In most universities, the course is planned for and offered by faculty from communications, English departments or any other department the university administration feels best suits to design and implement it. Library staff are called upon to only teach the 'library component', but do not participate in examining the course. It is not therefore uncommon to come across a student who has never stepped in the university library after four years of university education; or who only uses the library as a study space only, with the excuse that there are 'no books' in the library. The big casualties are students in Open Learning, School-based and those attending evening and week-end classes. Most are adult working-class and their courses are condensed. Most rely on lecture notes and subject course hand-outs which are normally sold in photocopying bureaus situated within the universities. Meanwhile, heavy investment in information materials and Information Communication Technology innovations continue to take place in university libraries in Kenya (Rosenberg, 2006) as they want to remain relevant in the 21st Century. Generally, information resources in most of these libraries are under-utilized.

Reliance on lecture method of teaching and the habit of reading for exams are other issues that hamper development of Information literacy in Kenyan universities. The lecture method does not encourage student-centred learning (Bundy, 2003) that would encourage development of life-long learning. Due to the high number of students in varied study programmes, most lecturers are

engaged in moon-lighting within and outside their own institutions. Others are officially required to teach in the unversity colleges of their mother universities and some are located as far as 300 Kilometers away. Such working condditions can be demoralizing. Adopting information literacy and requiring them to participate will be opposed in such situations as it will be seen as extra work. Related to this is the issue of 'full timetables' as in some cases, classes go on till 7.00 PM even in regular programmes.

Computer illiteracy among students and staff is an impendiment to Information Literacy efforts in Kenya. In some cases, librarians want to deal with only those who have some skills for one-to-one instruction. On the other hand, some senior faculty members fear exposing their computer illiteracy. They therefore avoid requesting for one-to-one training on how to access electronic resources, forcing libraries to continue buying print versions of journals that are available online (Amunga, 2007). Other critical issues include understaffing and lack of adequate access facilities like computers and peripherals, over-crowded libraries (especially during examinations). Inadequate funding of university libraries (Mutula, 2001; Kavulya, 2006) and lack of advocacy for Information Literacy have are key challenges too.

1.3 Efforts by Stakeholders Towards Improving IL in Kenyan Universities

1.3.1 Efforts at Primary and Secondary School Levels

There are several initiatives taking place aimed at improving access to information as well as ICTs in educational institutions. Some at the primary and secondary school level include the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) e-school launched in June 2003. The NEPAD initiative's objective is "to provide ICT skills and knowledge to primary and secondary school students that will enable them to function in the emerging information Society and Knowledge Economy" (NEPAD, e-Africa Commission). As a partner, the government of Kenya is in charge of teacher training and curriculum development. Tilwavala et al, (2009) hail it a success, as teachers and students are able to share information. Other notable efforts at this levels are the activities of organizations like the National Book Development Council of Kenya (NBDCK) and its partners like the Kenya Library Association, Egerton and Daystar Universities as well as the Kenya National Library services (KLA). The Council is currently carrying out a pilot project in training capacity-building of teacher-librarians at primary school level; and provision of reading materials. Book Aid International, and, the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation (JKF), and the Kenya Literature Bureau (KLB), just too mention a few, are engaged in book donations to schools. Generally, the impact of such initiatives should be felt at a higher educational level, for instance when students who have benefited join universities.

1.3.2 Kenya Education Network Trust (KENET)

KENET is a national research and education network whose responsibility is to promote the use of ICT in teaching, learning and research in higher education institutions in Kenya. The major issue for KENET is Internet pricing reforms and linking local universities to the Internet. It is funded by the government through the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology in partnership with

the Kenya ICT Board. The current membership stands at 45 institutions including all the seven public universities and their constituent colleges, private universities, research organizations, and government-affiliated corporations concerned with educational matters like the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB), Commission for Higher Education, and the Kenya National Library Services (KNLS), among others. Efforts of KENET have led to improved networks necessary for access to online information in the universities.

1.3.3 INASP/KLISC Capacity Building Workshops

Kenyan university, college and research libraries are beneficiaries of the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Information (INASP's) Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI). Through a consortium, the Kenya Libraries and Information Services Consortium (KLISC), this libraries pool financial resources and subscribe to online databases and e-journals at subsidized costs. Capacity of librarians and academics building aimed at improved access and use of information cover areas including management of electronic resources, bandwidth issues et cetra. The realization that the resources were not being maximally utilized led to the Information Literacy workshop in 2008, whose participants were University Librarians (policy-makers) and some of their staff (implementers). The workshop covered several aspects of IL: Definition and components of IL, IL standards, policy matters, institutional commitment, IL curriculum and assessment, etc. It was clear during the discussion and plenary sessions that most participants did not possess the requisite skills and competencies in coming up with an Information Literacy programme and mechanisms to implement it. Major identified challenges were curriculum design and implementation that would involve its integration in the main university curriculum; and how to collaborate with faculty and assess the large numbers of students. The policy-makers (University Librarians) promised to support IL programmes if introduced in their universities; and individual follow-ups by the facilitators has revealed IL initiatives, notably at the Africa Nazarene University, Strathmore University, the Inoorero University and the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, that includes some kind of assessment or examination

1.3.4 The Maktaba Award (Library Of the Year Award, LOYA)

This is an initiative of the Kenya Library Association (KLA), the Goethe-institut, Nairobi and the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation. The KLA is the professional organization of all informational professionals in the country, including librarians, archivists, information technologists, documentalists, et cetra. The Goethe-Institute is the cultural institute of the Federal Republic of Germany, while the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation is a government corporation engaged in educational publishing. This national award aims to recognize excellence in the provision of library and information service in the country. All types of libraries were eligible to apply and overall, 50 entries/profiles were received. The judging panel comprising representatives of the three stakeholders and three independent information professionals strongly agreed on the vital role that a comprehensive Information Literacy programme can play in regard to access and effective use of information and hence, put information literacy as one of the key indicators to be evaluated. Evaluation involved face to face interviews with library users and librarians, using standard interview guides. The culmination was the colorful awards

ceremony held on the 17th September, 2010 within the premises of the overall winner, the United States International University. The library and information professionals fraternity in Kenya was able to witness why the library won: heavy investment in the library building, information resources and ICTs and Information Literacy (the library has an Instruction Librarian), supported by clear policies and a strategic plan, and strong institutional support.

1.3.5   Stakeholders' Training on Plagiarism Detection

This can be categorized as an activity meant to treat the symptoms of lack of Information Literacy training in universities in Kenya. Scheduled to take place in early 2011, this training is another initiative of the Kenya Library Association; and INASP has committed to fund it with $ 9,000 (Ksh 720,000). It is aimed at training university librarians and senior lecturers from public universities on how to detect plagiarism using Open Access Plagiarism Checkers.

1.4   Suggestions on the way forward

The following are some lessons from the Kenyan experience:

♦ At the policy level, the government, information professionals, university administrators and other stakeholers should collectively formulate a national information literacy policy to be implemented throughout the whole educational sector and beyond. This should be accompanied with funding and development of libraries and information centers in schools; and the expansion of the Kenya National Library Services network in the country.

♦ The Commission for Higher Education (CHE), the government charged with accreditation of universities should implement its Standards for University Libraries in both public and private universities instead of dealing with the latter only. The standards should be frequently reviewed to be in tandem with internationally recognized standards; give weight to information literacy training standards and ensure their implementation

♦ Integration of Information Literacy in university curriculum should be mandatory. Universities should be required to provide the requisite funding, information, human and other resources for its effective implementation. Collaboration between the teaching faculty and academic librarians should be advocated for and encouraged

♦ All library and information science training institutions in the country should teach information literacy as a course at all levels and allow specialization in it from degree level. The course content should include pedagogy to enable graduates design and implement Information Literacy curriculum

♦ The current initiatives on Information Literacy in the country should be supported and expanded to cover more educational institutions. All institutions of higher learning should be required to be members of KENET, KLISC and INASP/PERii

♦ The Kenya Library Association should advocate for the establishment of school libraries, countrywide Information Literacy initiatives as well as engage more in capacity-building activities.

2. Conclusion

On paper, the government of Kenya is committed to achieving the Millenium Development Goals, through implementation of its blue-print, the Kenya Vision 2030. This blue print, if successfully implemented, would the country become a medium, industrialized economy by the year 2030. It is only until the policy-makers realize the vital role of information in achieving this and heavily investing in information access, use and creation that such a dream can be achieved. Funding university research on areas touching on the economic, social and political pillars of the Vision 2030 and requiring all universitise to have an active IL programme are some of the ways to success. Universities should embrace a paradigm shift: from Communication Skills to Information Literacy. It is the only way they will produce high quality graduates, improve research outputs and their dissemination, and therefore, be able to positively contribute towards the contry's development goals as expected.

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