Full Length Research

Reference Services in Academic Libraries: A Review

[1]Peter Olubunmi OLUBIYO and [2]Oresiri Jamogha

[1]College Library, Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, Nigeria.
Corresponding author's E-mail: olubiyopeter@gmail.com Tel.+2348166392038,
[2]College Library, Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, Nigeria. Tel. +2348034131226

Reference service is referred to as one of the most professional aspects of the librarian's responsibilities which every prospective librarian must properly grasp. It is a personal assistance provided to users in the pursuit of information, thus, anyone that has need of information no matter the subject, the first port of call should be the reference department of the library. This department has the human and materials resources to provide answers to any information need expressed by the user, while it can provide some information immediately; it could lead the inquirer to the discovery of more detailed information through a variety of tools and techniques that are available in the resources or information centres/libraries. Reference service in academic libraries is of paramount importance in information delivery to users especially when users have questions or queries to ask. Although, the digital age has brought about a lot of significant changes in the information search and quests by the 21st century generation of users, reference service has been modified but not in extinction. Hence, reference service is still an integral part of library services to discharge information verity to students and faculty members. It can therefore be recommended that libraries in the academic world should integrate information and communication technologies (ICT) utilization into reference services which will result to online/virtual reference services for contemporary standard.

INTRODUCTION

The term reference service in library according to Udensi and Akor (2014) in Akor and Alhassan (2015) is a direct personal assistance to readers seeking for information in the library. It is also defined as a personal assistance provided to users in the pursuit of information, thus, anyone that has need of information no matter the subject, the first port of call should be the reference department of the library. This department has the human and materials resources to provide answers to any information need expressed by the user, while it can provide some information immediately it could also lead the inquirer to the discovery of more detailed information through a variety of tools and techniques that are available in the resources or information centres/libraries

(Akor and Alhassan 2015). ACRL, (2005) in Ademodi (2011) stated that reference service often involves individual instruction, to some extent general reference service contributes to producing more information-literate students.

Specifically concerning services, academic libraries should design a group of services to fulfill the institutional mission and goals and should actively assess these services to ascertain whether performance targets are being met (Ademodi, 2011). Similarly Crawford (1994) stated that one of the primary goals of such services is to provide services that meet the information needs and desires of their patrons which leads to promotion of libraries. As such, one of the services is Reference Services. Olalokun (2001) as cited by Akor and Alhassan (2015), posited that reference departments serve as the

link between the library and its immediate clientele- they may be public, community or groups of specialist users. The main aim is to provide a wide range of services and facilities, which will enhance exploitative use of the literature through the concepts of assistance and self-direction which is reference services.

Reference Service: An Overview

According to Fakundu and Saleh (2015) reference services began in early 20th century in response to development in society and library use. There was an increase in the volume, variety and format of information resources available, including, but not exhaustively found in libraries. Consequently, it became more difficult for library users to find the resources they were looking for and to find information they need within that resource without an aid from library personnel. There was an increase in the number and diversities of people using libraries, leading to a wider range of information needs and enquiries and sophistication with the search for information. The availability of unprecedented amount of information, which has affected the method of organisation and retrieval, makes it necessary to employ reference and information specialists to assist users. Seeking information or knowledge about something, wanting to know something about anything or anything about something have brought about the essential provision of reference services in libraries.

Ifidon and Ifidon (2008) in Fakandu and Saleh (2015) described reference services as the professional assistance provided by a trained librarian to assist individuals (using the reading rooms or making enquiries by mail, telephone or online) in either locating information resources or access required information directly, using materials in the library collection or elsewhere. It also includes information products such as guides, and databases or the equipment and facilities that are provided to enable research to be carried out to meet information needs. Ultimately, reference service is not simply someone asking a question and someone else providing an answer. It is about someone with an information problem interacting with someone with information skills.

Janes (2004) as cited in Ademodi (2011) explained that reference work includes the direct, personal aid within a library to persons in search of information for whatever purpose, and also various library activities especially aimed at making information as easily available as possible. In line with this, Achebe (2012) in Okeke, Oghenetga and Nwabu (2013) was of the view that reference and information service is an aspect of library service in which contact between the reader and library materials is established through staff assistance, matching the user with the library materials which could be printed or electronic. The author further said that, as a service

Legally provided by the reference librarian, there is no gain saying that reference and information service (RIS) is the life-wire and bridge of any library. The absence of this service can make or mar the image of not only the library but also that of profession.

Kinds of Reference Services

Barman (2014) as cited in Fakandu and Saleh (2015) asserted that there are two aspects of reference services:

- ### Ready Reference Service

Most of the ready reference services are of the nature of fact-finding type that can be finished in a very short time, in a moment if possible. The librarian generally uses reference book for providing such kind of services. The need of ready reference services arises from the fact of the complex nature of a reference book, its artificiality, and arrangement of information.

- ### Long Range Reference Service

The long range reference service is based on consulting every possible source of information to arrive at the required information; as such it is not possible to render this type of service immediately. The time needed may range from have an hour to weeks. The search in the long range reference service starts at the reference books and then goes to the ordinary books, pamphlets, reports, articles in periodicals, etc if the information is not available in the library then the search can go to other libraries. The long range reference service provided today can become the ready reference service tomorrow, as by this time the reference librarian will be able to locate the material quickly from his past experience.

Reference Librarian

The traditional role of the reference librarian has been changing as a response to prevalence of technologies. The responsibilities for outreach and extension beyond the physical library building have become increasingly important (Okoroma, 2018). In addition, Nwalo (2000) in Akor and Alhassan (2015) opined that the modern reference librarian does not merely acquire published documents or books but also documents original information emanating from its locality such original documentation which covers socio-cultural issues but ordinarily might not have been the subject of books for a long time to come.

According to Retiz (2004) as cited by Akor and Alhassan (2015) reference librarian performs as a trained librarian in the reference section of a library all reference services to meet the information needs of the patrons (in person, by telephone, or electronically), including but not limited to answering substantive

questions, instructing users in the selection and use of appropriate resources and techniques for finding information, conducting searches on behalf of the patron, directing users to the location of library resources, assisting in the evaluation of information, referring patrons to resources outside the library when appropriate, keeping reference statistics and participating in the development of the reference collection. Evaluation of services in any library is done in order to find out whether or not they are meeting the desired goals and to what extent- this is also being done by the reference librarian. According to Lewis (1994) reference librarians will need to perform the following tasks:

- balance a broad range of tasks-desk services, consultations, instruction, collection development, and involvement in implementing new technologies.
- maintain traditional desk and instructional services as well as to add consulting services and program and project development activities, especially with electronic products and services.
- reference librarians will require a broad generalist's background to deal with a wide range of clients.
- Library and information technologies will continue to change and evolve. This will require continued investment in equipment and a constant renewal of skills. These investments will, when wisely made, produce powerful and effective information tools. Thus, reference librarian needs renewal of skills to cope in ICT library environment.
- Campus networks will expand and many significant information resources will be made available over these networks. These resources will be developed locally and purchased from vendors. They will be available on machines in the library, elsewhere on campus, and at other locations. An important task for reference librarians will be integrating these resources and making them useful and convenient for client groups.

Schement (2002) in Akor and Alhassan (2015) opined that reference librarians are variously referred to as 'mediators between the user and the information', and 'navigators of information superhighway'. The role of the reference librarian has changed greatly over the last two decades with the emergence of information technology and the huge impact in the librarianship and information provision. The role has grown from that of a collector and preserver of information resources to a professional involved in very complex issues of organization, the dissemination of and access to information. Thus, due to the digital age, there has been a redefinition of the way reference librarians provide services. Therefore, Anderson (1996) in Afolabi (2018) distinguished the emerging services of a reference librarian in a digital age to include:

- The selection of electronic resources and the evaluation of their qualities.
- The evolvement of quick and effective locator tools to make the complex web of resources more readily accessible to both sophisticated and naïve users.
- The production of value-added components and indexing to the web of resources that will continue to build-up.
- Teaching of novices how to locate resources. Reference librarian can also teach specialists in various fields how to find relevant resources in their discipline and even outside their own fields.
- Functioning as a bridge between system designers and users, by having sufficient credibility with programmers and by understanding users needs. Reference librarians can serve as the user's advocate with the system designer while also interpreting to the user what may or may not be technically feasible.

In the assertion of Raghavan, (2000), Burke (2003), and Tedd (2003) in Akor and Alhassan (2015), the reference librarian's responsibilities have increased by societal expectations for information access through enhanced electronic capabilities. Reference librarians are the key to the continued success of libraries. Several researchers have discussed the new role of librarians in the digital age. From their views highlighted, it is no doubt that the digital revolution has brought changes and affected the librarian and other information professional. This set-up is also changing the roles of the reference librarian into teaching, consultancy and researching besides providing access to information. The reference librarian must guide users in information gathering, information skills and tools, organizing information resources, search strategies, basic reference works, etc. Thus, reference librarians must acquire relevant skills and competence in the application of the skills to the use of ICT in providing reference services to users (Akor and Alhassan 2015).

Reference Services in Digital Age

Sputore, Humphries and Steiner (2015) asserted that the radical evolution of library services since the emergence of the digital age has, arguably, been most significantly experienced in the reference services area. Reference services have adapted admirably to the mass digitalization of information sources and changes in scholarly publishing; employing new face to face and online approaches to assist clients in accessing appropriate electronic information sources through constantly changing technologies. The digital age has brought about a completely different way of providing library services resulting to the development of new services, reference services inclusive (Gbaje, 2007).

Jabir (2008) explained that virtual reference is an online

reference service that enables library patrons to ask reference questions through a library's web site. The user may be at home, in an office, at school, or in a library. Some virtual reference services also place answers to frequently asked questions (FAQS), selected reference tools, and access to selected databases on the web site. Unlike traditional reference, virtual reference services allow patrons to submit questions and receive answers via the internet and other electronic. Thus, reference services in the digital age could be referred to as virtual/online reference services.

According to Gbaje (2007) in Olubiyo and Sheji (2011), online reference service began with simple communication exchanges such as online information request forum on the web and e-mail. Reference questions and answer can be exchanged in an online environment without any need of physical appearance. Thus, virtual reference service is the electronic access to reference department. It is a service which is being conducted online and the reference transaction is a computer-mediated communication. This form of reference work expands reference services from physical reference desk to a virtual reference desk where patron could be writing from home, work or a variety of locations (Wikipedia, 2022). Similarly, in response to the shift to virtual inquiry, Gbaje,(2007) asserted that librarians have to repackage and customize their reference services in line with virtual inquiry. Online reference methods began with simple communication exchanges, such as online information request forms on the Web and e-mail.

Information and communication technology (ICT) have brought versatility in the types and mode of reference services delivery. Library as a physical place where one can visit to get information is rapidly eroding to a social cyberspace where users access, communicate and contribute to the existing knowledge. The 21st century library armed with ICT has become a more dynamic, two-way communicational network environment. The modern library is therefore characterized of collective knowledge creation and enabling technologies which is a diversion from the old conventional stereotype, and one directional library services to users. The changing library environment today, demands that academic libraries use the latest technologies and trends to make their services more popular, interesting and user friendly. The rapid decline of traditional reference interactions in many academic and research libraries further necessitate a perennial attempt to reposition reference services into a variety of virtual services, outreaches and engagement initiatives, and to redesign the library spaces into learning and information commons (Okoroma, 2018).

Hence, Madu (2010) citing Gash (2000) identified some benefits of the use of online/virtual reference services. They include:

- **Speed of Retrieval:** Information are gotten from online with ease unlike manual searching that may

take some time to locate. Reference librarian search for information online to answer queries and the get this information retrieved with speed because it is in electronic form. At the same time the librarian can post the gotten information to enquirer at a click.

- **Range of Databases:** Electronic search offers a librarian a wide range of databases for search. This opportunity is limited with print copy search as libraries can subscribe to online databases for the use of reference librarian in order to satisfy reference users of their needs

- **Print Out:** With the existence of avalanche of information online, there is possibility of mixing them up. But with the aid of printer the needed information can be printed out by the reference librarian to meet the need of the questioner. Also, the aged users of the library who could not read on the screen can be assisted with the hard copies through printing it out.

- **Resource Sufficiency:** The world is now an electronic world with the infusion of information and communication technologies. Reference librarian may not need to consult any library for resource sharing with the availability of online resources.

- **Global Village:** Users can be contacted at any moment of the day for answering of reference queries through the assistance of ICT. Thus, online reference services have turned the world to a global village with no restriction through ICT.

Challenges to Reference Services in Academic Libraries

1. Jameson, Natal and Napp (2019) in a research carried out explained that students previously surveyed in a literature, have frequently expressed feelings of insecurity, embarrassment, or concern about interrupting librarians for help with research. These and similar concerns appear throughout the literature and have been placed under the umbrella term "library anxiety." Thus, some users are afraid to approach librarians especially the hostile ones which lead libphobia- the fear of using a library.

2. Another challenge as reported by Gardner and Eng (2005) in Jameson, Natal and Napp, (2019) research is an analysis using "google generation". The authors chose to use 21st century generation students as Google Generation and that they did not think of the library as a physical space; they preferred researching online. Therefore they concluded that web use has created an attitude of expediency and confidence for them, thereby lessening the likelihood that students will ask a librarian for assistance.

3. Seemiller and Meghan (2016) as cited in Jameson, Natal and Napp, (2019) in survey results found that students of the 21st century prefer to learn independently; they have no problem seeking counsel from their peers, and they rely exceedingly

on text messaging but not consulting a librarian. Fallows (2005) in Martin (2009) corroborated that students of this generation thought they have the search skills and thus do not see the need for reference services. Equally, Xie and Sun (2015) in Jameson, Natal and Napp, (2019) surveyed some Chinese students and revealed that they felt confident enough to conduct research on their own, rendering the available reference services in their college library underused. This was attributed to increased web use, and a teacher-centric approach to instruction (mostly in-class).

4. By using the Internet, patrons, especially students, have become convinced that most information is easy to locate and available freely online. And because so many queries can be answered quickly online, patrons feel ashamed if they cannot locate answers on their own. The ease and convenience of the Internet convinces our patrons that they are skilled information seekers. Thus, it is important to examine not only the fact that people do not consider the library as the portal to information in the information society but also the reality that patrons judge themselves to be capable information seekers (Martin, 2009). As, such they do not consult librarian.

5. The Internet boosts students' search confidence, however, the library often has the opposite effect. Using library resources to obtain satisfactory results requires more skills than using Internet search engines, and most library systems lack the simplicity and intuitiveness of the online search box. Our libraries, instead of offering simplicity, often feature search tools that cannot be manipulated to create precise searches. But while librarians see power in our database and catalog options (such as Boolean operators, truncation, and multiple search boxes), patrons see obstructions. And when our self-confident patrons fail in their searches for academic information, they are left feeling ashamed, confused, and, above all, frustrated with the library (Martin, 2009).

6. (Francoeur, 2001; Luo, 2007; Nicholas 2011) in Uutoni (2014) expressed that staffing is crucial to the library because the introduction of new services such as digital reference services requires additional staff. New staff members needed to be employed for the digital reference services. The librarians who work with digital reference services need to be selected based on the following criteria: librarians' interest to work with digital reference services; their availability; their enthusiasm towards digital reference services; good customer service skills; comfort with technology and electronic resources. Thus, it was noted that finding staff for digital reference services is a challenge. Many librarians already working in libraries resist working with digital reference services as it adds to their responsibilities especially in the

developing countries

Proffered Solution to the Challenges in Reference Services in Academic Library

- Library instruction has been recommended as an intervention to prevent at-risk students from developing library anxiety, and it has been shown to reduce students' library anxiety levels. The instruction overwhelmingly promotes positive interaction between students and librarians, together with attention to the library environment, which diminish library anxiety (Jameson, Natal and Napp, 2019).

- Librarians are to generate a true reference revolution, however, they must consider transformation that is broader than generational differences or technological advances. Instead of focusing primarily on generational and technological issues, there is need to examine the heightened importance of information, the increased demand for online information, and the shifting perceptions of 21st century generation in a context that takes a much broader view (Martin 2009).

- There is an increased need for formal methods of remote communication between information seeker and information professionals. Libraries and information organizations should respond to this need by providing more reference service via the Internet, or digital reference service, to their users in this digital age (Kasowitz, 2001). Also, Uutoni (2014) asserted that the launching of digital reference services by academic libraries is on the increase. Therefore, libraries exploring new ways of expanding their services by interacting with users and responding to user inquiries via the Internet, especially students enrolled on the distance mode of studying. This will initiate the spirit of collaboration into them

- The technology driven environment today is pressing hard on every aspect of human endeavour. This demands that academic libraries use the latest technologies and trends to make their services more popular, interesting and user friendly (Okoroma, 2018). For academic libraries in developing countries to be able to provide effective and optimal reference services of the 21st century standard, a technology stimulus is very pertinent. Librarians must develop ICT skills beyond the basic skills to prove to the users that they know better and this will help them not to judge themselves again as capable information seekers who does not need librarian's assistance. Thus, for academic libraries to be able to implement and use the virtual reference services, the reference services staff must be highly skilled and versatile in the ICT. In this regard, appropriate trainings on digital technology skills both in-house and through

seminars, workshops, mentoring, train the trainer, conferences and further education are absolutely imperative (Abubakar,2021).

- With the growth of digital reference services and collaborative networks in the 21st century, there is a clear need for defined standards in order to ensure service quality and interoperable technology (Kasowitz,2001). (Lankes, 1999; Lankes, 2001) in (Kasowitz,2001) expressed that standards development for digital reference technology includes specifications for expressing, sharing and storing data captured in digital reference transactions (i.e., question-answer exchanges).

- Furthermore, there is the need for all governments in developing countries to invest profoundly in technology and infrastructure by prioritizing investment in computers, fibre internet, and broadband, access to tools, electricity generation and creating digital skills. This will drive developing countries, as well as the academic libraries to take their rightful place in the emerging real time reference services, where communication technology tools are envisaged to play a pivotal role(Abubakar,2021).

- This challenge is probably associated with instruction in the classroom, although many other library departments also interact with the public. Personal attention is at the very heart of the reference department, and the goal of information literacy is to create confident information consumers. To reverse the decline in use of reference services, academic reference librarians must transform their approach in delivering instruction (Martin 2009).

- To conquer the issue of staffing in reference section in the 21st century, younger generation should be employed to coordinate reference services.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Reference service in academic libraries is of paramount importance in information delivery to users especially when users have questions or queries to ask. Although, the digital age has brought about a lot of significant changes in the information search and quests by the 21st century generation of users, reference service has been modified but not in extinction. Hence, reference service is still an integral part of library services to discharge information verity to students and faculty members. It can therefore be recommended that libraries in the academic world should integrate information and communication technologies (ICT) utilization into reference services which will result to online/virtual reference services for contemporary standard.

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