

**BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF ACADEMIC LIBRARY
DECENTRALISATION IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM: THE NEED FOR
SOCIAL POLICY LEGISLATION**

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ABSTRACT

Decentralisation of academic library brings about many gains which include; accessibility and proximity, ease of usage, relief and decongestion to central library, specialization, satisfaction of accreditation requirements, and standardization of service. Structure of decentralization in Nigeria university libraries include full, partial and mixed method of decentralization. Objects and structure of decentralization were also revealed in an exploratory analysis following system framework. Data used were entirely secondary. It was concluded that decentralization benefits cannot be derived without challenges in terms of cost, administrative difficulties, wastage and duplication, inadequate manpower, lack of physical space, facilities and security challenges. It was recommended that proprietors of public universities in Nigeria being the federal and state government should amend public university Acts and provide social policy framework in which

benefits of decentralized academic library system will be achieved without destroying coordination, control and industrial harmony in terms of adopting full decentralization in small institutions and mixed method in complex institutions.

Keywords: Academic library, Decentralisation, Benefits, Challenges, Social Policy

Legislation.

INTRODUCTION

Academic library is an integral component of any university. It is in the library that books and other educational resources are preserved for students, researchers, lecturers and other university stakeholders to make use of at every point of need. The core mandate of any university is teaching, learning and research, which cannot effectively take place without a functional library. The structure and position of library within the university itself helps to determine how effective the library is to diverse users within the university and bring in mind the issue of centralization and decentralization.

All organisations practice a certain degree of decentralization to get things done as at when due. Same is applicable in academic library as an organization or unit of university organization. Decentralisation generally denotes devolution of authority and responsibility for public functions from central government to intermediate and local government or quasi-independent government organisations and/or in the private sector (The World Bank Group, 2001). In all academic libraries, decentralization entails performance of library function by smaller libraries in various sectors of the academic institutions' management. Library centralization on the other hand refers to a situation where library functions are concentrated in one location, where all library services are provided.

Library centralization and decentralization are widely practiced by universities in the world. Which of the option is most beneficial to the university and at what situation and circumstance are such benefits maximized? Most Nigerian universities practice library centralization, including the University of Calabar, University of Uyo and University of Port Harcourt though with units without autonomy. Few universities operate a purely decentralized library system, like Rivers State University of Science and Technology library. Some other universities that are multi-campus operate a multi-library system, which are not essentially decentralized, but to ensure library services are provided at various locations in which the universities are sited. For example, Akwa Ibom State University and Cross River University of Technology. It is in the light of this distinctive model of managing academic libraries in Nigerian universities that it becomes appropriate to analyse benefits and challenges of one of the models, which is decentralization.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The essence of university is to provide teaching, learning and research which produce world class scholars that can compete with contemporaries anywhere in the world in this era of globalization. But most products of universities especially in Nigeria and other developing countries cannot stand this global scholarship display or competition, which also affects research products and output. One

major input to quality of university output is the standard and performance of university library.

Issues regarding library include: management system, location, space, holdings, accessibility and personnel which determines library service delivery as it influences quality of teaching, learning and research, as well as quality of graduates of both undergraduate and graduate programmes (Basheer & Razzaq, 2012; Cox & Janthi, 2012). It therefore becomes imperative to examine decentralization of library in Nigerian universities, a library management approach as practiced by few universities and its impact on quality of output in terms of students' performance, research, teaching and learning process, since all determine the overall functionality of university academic library as a system, in terms of dwindling quality and standard.

Systems that are not performing maximally require policies, programmes and actions to revitalize and position them for high performance in terms of service delivery. In this regard, are these policies and programmes deliberately put in place to ensure proper management of university libraries in Nigeria and how effective are such social policies if they exist? The main thrust is to determine if decentralization of academic library is more beneficial than centralized system, and if so, what are the challenges of adopting a decentralized system in Nigeria university system?

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to examine the benefits of institutional library decentralization in Nigeria university, as well as the challenges affecting decentralization of library services in universities. The study also examined the need for legislation to promote library decentralization in tertiary institutions.

CONCEPT CLARIFICATION AND REVIEW

This section looks at library, academic library, library decentralization, forms of decentralized libraries, structure, or pattern of library decentralization. It also presents brief literature review on decentralization of academic library.

Library

Ottong and Edem (2011) described library as an institution or establishment, a store house for knowledge and a building where information resources collected are stored and preserved for users. Information resources in the library include: text and printed books, online or e-books, periodicals, films, journals, magazines, newsletters, etc. Library resources serve different purposes for users, such as: supporting independent learning, general knowledge, recreational value, and dissemination of information for awareness creation.

There are different types of libraries, namely: school library, public library, special library and academic library (Ottong and Edem,

2011). School libraries are part of school organization be it primary or secondary, helping students to learn more without teachers and operate in line with school curriculum. Public libraries serve the general public, are established by government and funded by public fund (tax). Public library provides free library service to the users and are universal in nature, serving intellectual, recreational and cultural preservation functions. Example of public libraries in Nigeria are state and national libraries. Special libraries serve specialized communities, institutions or professions, for example medical library and libraries created by diverse organisations to serve their specific needs. Private libraries exist which are like public libraries in scope, but a profit making organization where users pay for services. Academic libraries are libraries which are established by tertiary institutions to promote teaching, learning and research.

The core library functions are divided into two which are: technical functions and general functions. Technical functions involve: acquisition, collection development, circulation, classification, dissemination and cataloguing, while general functions include: counselling, provision of library resources to users, guidance on use of materials and resources, awareness creation and material preservation (Etim & Nssien, 2007). University library as academic libraries perform these functions whether centralized or decentralized.

Academic library

This is a library which is attached to a tertiary education institution like a university, polytechnic, monotechnic and college of education. Academic library serves two main purposes, which are: supporting institutions' curriculum and supporting learning, teaching and research of students and faculty members. Contemporary academic libraries provide access to electronic resources like e-books and e-journals. Academic libraries vary in size and structure, depending largely on the size and complexity of institution owning them.

In conventional tertiary host institutions, there are always departments of academic library responsible for ensuring acquisition and holding are in line with specialization needs and requirements of faculty and students as determined by curriculum and prevailing development in each field of specialty which is not so applicable in academic library of a monotechnic. Academic library refers to a library based in university domain in providing support for research and education activities and any data management required in line with the mission, faculty, staff and students' research needs (IGI-Global, 2020). All university libraries in Nigeria, be it public or private universities are in essence academic libraries.

Academic library decentralization

Academic library decentralization is the process whereby a library in a tertiary institution exists not in one location, where power and authority to perform generic and technical library functions are devolved from

central library to lower level libraries created in line with the structure of the institutions. The lower level libraries in a complete decentralized library system have power to take decisions and initiate policies guiding operations within the level. Centralised library system on the other hand exists when there is one central library where all decisions and policies are made or where central library determines activities in branch libraries, which are not independent but owe their existence and depend entirely on central library. In essence, library system in an institution may have branches or unit which are not independent but exist as units of main or central library which is still essentially a centralized system.

Forms of decentralised academic libraries

There are two main types of decentralized academic libraries, namely: complete decentralization and partial decentralization. Complete decentralization occurs when branches or lower units of an institution can exist on their own and their budget is independent of the central or main library. Complete decentralization is also referred to as “total decentralization” or “full decentralization”. Partial decentralization of academic library exists when core management functions are performed by the main or central library, while power on routine activity decisions is delegated to branch libraries. In partial decentralization, full functional autonomy is not given to branch or unit libraries. The third is a mixed system that

combines characteristics of centralized and decentralized library system, like the University of Calabar.

Objects of academic library decentralization

Library decentralization is devolution of power and authority to make decisions and policy. In a full decentralized academic library, decisions and policy making power is posited equally in both central and branch libraries in matters and issues affecting each level. Another object is performance of function, which implies that fully decentralized library, all general and technical library functions are performed at all levels. For example, Main library carry out acquisition, branch or unit library also carry out acquisition. In partial decentralization, certain functions are reserved for main or central library. Most strategic and general library holdings/materials are exclusive reserve of main library and personnel are often distributed from Central in centralized and partial decentralization. Full decentralization requires creating autonomous library space at different levels of institution's operation.

Structure and pattern of decentralized library

Structure of decentralized academic library system in Nigerian universities follows the organizational structure of the university. It consists of main or central library, which serves the whole institution. In an institution operating collegiate system, there exists college libraries

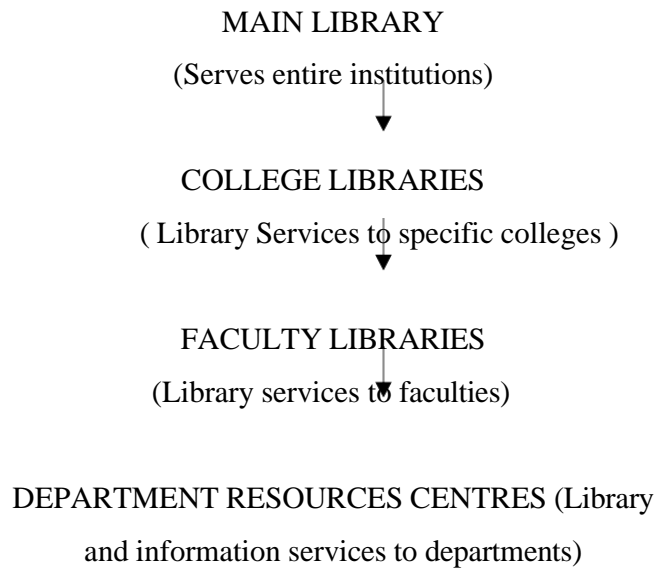


Figure 1: Hierarchy of University Decentralised Library System

Source: Iwe (2006)

serving different colleges. Since colleges are made up of faculties, following college libraries are faculty libraries serving each faculty. Last level is the departments within the faculties.

Some institutions combine faculty and college system, like University of Calabar, with only College of Medical Science with a standard college library, where faculties within the college have resource centres. University of Uyo has main library in the city campus and another library at the permanent site. Faculties in the university have resource centres. Same situation in the University of Uyo is applicable in Cross River State University of Technology

and Akwa Ibom State University, all in SouthSouth Nigeria which operates a multicampus system and established libraries in line with number of campuses (Iwe, 2006). One of the only universities in South-South Nigeria with a decentralized library system is the Rivers State University – UST (Rivers State University, 2020). Since most universities operate centralization, what is the benefit of decentralization for other universities to gain from and challenges they are likely to face in their change to decentralization?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Iwe (2006) looks at decentralization as a management strategy in running university academic libraries. He studied university

libraries in South Eastern Nigeria, particularly University of Calabar, University of Uyo and Cross River State University of Technology. Using descriptive survey method, with questionnaire instrument, Iwe (2006) discovered that centralization of these three university libraries studied stabilized management system by creating cohesion, harmony, effective coordination and control. This implies that decentralization can cause destabilization.

Shohan and Klain-Gabbay (2019) empirical study using qualitative and quantitative method with interview and questionnaire respectively examined both faculty and librarians. Through interview, 20 faculty and 15 librarians were studied and with questionnaire 191 faculty and 50 librarians were studied. They discovered faculty members prefer centralization rather than decentralization, while librarians prefer decentralization to faculty libraries than centralization. Both groups did not prefer libraries being decentralized to the departmental level. Consequently, departmental library was the least favoured by both faculty and librarians.

Shishko and Raffel (1971) looked at centralization and decentralization in terms of location approach to analysis of academic libraries. They considered decentralization of operating multiple library system, which produces problematic industrial situation that is difficult to manage. They also looked at decentralization as bringing library close to

classroom, offices and dormitories which will increase library budgeting cost. They opted for centralization of library in one location to reduce financial burden in terms of cost and avoiding management complexities.

Poon (1987) focused on advantages of decentralized library system. He identified such advantages as accessibility, ease of use, specialization in service, relief to central library, which to him outweighed cost and administrative difficulties. He identified accessibility, ease of use, special service and relief for the main library as major benefits of decentralized academic library system. Poon (1987) considered cost and administrative difficulties as two cardinal challenges of academic library decentralization from his background in the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Subsequent section deals with benefits and challenges of academic library decentralization as applicable in Nigerian university system.

Theoretical framework

Analysis followed systems approach. A system is a complex whole that is made up of many parts that are working together, and are interdependent, interrelated and interconnected to one another in arriving at a unified goal (Bertalanffy, 1968). A system has subsystems and information systems like the library are regulated. The university academic library is a system of its own with component parts, especially a decentralized university library, which may also be viewed as a subsystem of

the university organization. Various parts of a decentralized library interrelate with one another to ensure that efficient and effective library service is provided in the university, the failure of which will affect the success of the entire university organization. Therefore, it becomes imperative to adopt the most appropriate management technique in the university library to ensure effectiveness and efficiency for quality service delivery.

METHODOLOGY

The main variable in the analysis is library decentralization, which is independent, while the dependent variable is Nigerian university system. Exploratory analysis was used to reveal the benefits and challenges of library decentralization on Nigerian universities. Data were obtained from secondary sources in books, journals and internet sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION Benefits of academic library decentralization in Nigeria university system

Benefits of academic library decentralization are enormous generally (Iwe, 2006; Shishko & Raffel, 1971; Poon, 1987). Consequently, focus will rest on accessibility, proximity, increased usage, easy usage, specialization of service, relief and decongestion of main library, utilization of personnel, standardization of holding and satisfaction of accreditation requirement.

Accessibility and proximity of users:

Decentralisation of academic library brings library closer to the users, which entails proximity. Users in departments and faculties have library closer to them, in which there is no need to pay transport or walk long distances to get to the library, making the library more accessible.

Increase in library usage: Proximity and accessibility creates opportunities for increased utilization of library services. When library is decentralized, faculty members and students that were unable to go to library due to long distance, will have the library close by and will start utilization of library thereby increasing usage. This falls in line with Poon's (1987) position that decentralization of academic library promotes usage.

Ease of usage: In a centralized library which is complex, sorting or location of materials is a difficult task for users, but in a decentralized library, this complexity is eliminated and it is easy to locate materials and resources. In faculty library for instance, it is easy to make provisions for departments within the faculty, which is not possible in main or central library, therefore making it easy for members of departments in the faculty to use the library as indicated by Poon (1987) that decentralization makes usage of library easy.

Specialisation: Academic libraries have two perspectives of specialization namely: specialization of personnel and holding

specialization. Library personnel will specialize in subject areas of faculty and departments where they are assigned. This will increase their knowledge and awareness of materials and resources needed in such areas, which results in holding specialization being the stock of library with resources and materials in specific area in which the library was created to serve. For example the Medical College library in University of Calabar is devoted exclusively for medical books and materials. This will foster greater competence in faculty and students (Poon, 1987).

Relief and decongestion of main library:

Decentralisation of academic library brings into existence structure of main and sublibraries in a particular institution. When unit libraries are available and users can satisfy their immediate needs in their unit library, their use of main or central library will reduce. In University of Calabar, the existence of Law library to serve law faculty, reduces their patronage of central library. This situation is common in every school with decentralized library system, where traffic to central library is reduced significantly, thereby creating enough library reading space to every user at any given point in time. Consequently, decentralization of academic library eliminates queues for reading space and use of materials. The extent of law faculty and college of medical science patronizing more of their libraries corroborates Poon's (1987) notion of relied and decongestion occasioned by

decentralization, partial decentralization or mixed system like University of Calabar.

Standardization of library services and satisfaction of accreditation requirement:

Every library requires standard service with standard and quality resources. The larger and more complex the categories of clients or users, the more difficult it is for the library to attain standard. Decentralisation provides avenue to reduce complexity in order to achieve standard in quality of service and holding. Such standard requirements include: having specialized subject librarians and officers, having contemporary texts in different fields, and providing adequate space for users from various fields in line with the programmes of the university.

Standard requirements are specific needs for the approval of new programmes and accreditation of existing programmes by the National University Commission in Nigeria. These requirements are easily satisfied with library decentralization. In essence, academic library decentralization is not only an important library tool, but a critical strategy for satisfying programme accreditation in Nigeria university system.

Challenges and problems of academic library decentralization

Despite the benefits of academic library decentralization, there are notable challenges confronting its implementation.

Poon (1987) identified cost and administrative difficulties, which is supported by Shishko and Raffel (1971) higher cost and administrative complexity. Other challenges to academic library decentralization include: wastage and duplication, inadequate manpower, lack of physical space, security problems and interference in unity library management.

Increasing cost: Decentralisation goes with increasing cost. Cost in terms of acquisition of materials and resources for the different unit libraries. Another area of cost is construction, furnishing and maintaining of library equipment and facilities. Cost also emerges in terms of personnel emoluments. Academic library as noted by Poon (1987), and Shishko and Raffel (1971), though novel and beneficial in diversity of ways, goes with enormous costs which most institutions cannot provide or source. This may explain why most tertiary institutions still maintain one central library.

Administrative difficulties: It is easy to manage one than to manage many.

Decentralisation of academic library will automatically increase the number of libraries to the number of colleges, faculties and departments in an institution. This comes with the problem of being able to coordinate men and materials to be in line with achieving central objectives. Parallel policies will emerge causing confusion which may disorganize the library system which Shishko and Raffel (1971) considered as industrial problematic

occasioned by academic library decentralization. This is because conflict is detrimental to social wellbeing of people and systems they exist in (Ushie, Bassey, Ushie & Fortune, 2020).

Wastage and duplication: Decentralisation of library generally causes wastage due to duplication of materials in different units of library in a particular institution. For instance, all students are required to take general studies course, which materials should be provided in all the libraries. This is duplication and waste of resources.

Inadequate manpower: Increasing the number of libraries due to decentralization requires hiring more hands. Where personnel cost is further increased, serious problem is posed. Education is seriously affected by funding and reducing personnel cost is one of the target goal of Nigeria government, as shown by the introduction of Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS).

Lack of physical space and security problems: Most tertiary institutions lack physical space in terms of land for expansion. This affects academic library decentralization which requires physical space for building of unit libraries. Some institutions suffer lack of space for lecture rooms and office accommodation for staff. Provision for more land space for library will affect the growth of other component units of the institution. The larger

and more decentralized the library, the greater the need for security, safety and guarding of library equipment, facilities and holdings.

Interference in library activities:

Decentralised library brings a peculiar problem to management of library. This problem is the interference of leadership of faculties, colleges and departments in the day-to-day running of libraries assigned to serve their units. This brings about tussle with librarian over control and key decision making, which if not properly handled can lead to suspension of service or closure of the library.

RECOMMENDATION

Though benefits of decentralization of academic library are enormous, the decision to adopt decentralization as a policy option in library management should be handled with care in view of its pitfalls or challenges. Library generally is a social service which comes into existence through social policy, likewise public education as a whole. Since decentralization of academic library cannot be achieved without obstacles and even its achievement is not sustainable due to challenges, it is appropriate to, as a matter of social policy legislation, put in place a policy framework which enables the benefits of decentralization of academic library to be achieved in especially public universities without necessarily sacrificing centralization benefits of effective coordination, control and management of academic library as done in the University of Calabar.

In view of this, the Public University Act being a social policy should make adequate provision for a mixed library system where decentralization will be provided for professionalized areas like medicine, engineering and law, while general studies, liberal and general science areas should be in the main and central library to avoid duplication. As noted by Shoham and Klain-Gabbey (2019) that departmental libraries are least preferred, departments should be assigned resource centres but not libraries. This should be documented and legislated upon to provide full legal backing in satisfaction of the maintenance of quality standard and accreditation requirements.

Providing legislation to promote library services falls in line with Bassey, Archibong and Eteng's (2020) position that legislation will promote various areas of socio-economic life and bring about development. Library is one of such areas that promotes socio-cultural development and takes away underdevelopment (Bassey, Ikpeme & Ushie, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Decentralisation is a novel strategy for managing academic libraries in Nigerian universities. It is applied by few institutions to enjoy numerous benefits of decentralization. But the benefits are not without problems and difficulties that are very critical to the survival of the academic library itself as a unit of university organization. To avoid these

problems, such as funding or cost of decentralization and industrial problems occasioned by administrative complexity of a decentralized library system, most schools have opted for partial decentralization which revealed a mixed method as practiced in the University of Calabar. Decentralisation as a practice is not good for a complex institution, which accounts for its successful implementation in Rivers State University of Science and Technology. Consequently, social legislation should be put in place by proprietors of public universities in Nigeria which will stipulate extent of decentralization of library in various institutions in order to maximize its benefits and minimize its disadvantages.

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