

# Reinventing academic libraries in Kenya

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## Introduction

Academic libraries today are complex institutions with multiple roles and a host of related operations and services developed over the years (Campbell, 2006). As fountains of knowledge they provide services to support learning and research activities to their parent organizations. In this respect, they have long stood unchallenged throughout the world as the primary source of recorded knowledge and historical records. However, today academic libraries in Kenya seem to be facing daunting challenges in regard to their primary role of delivering information to their users. The reason as to why academic libraries in Kenya are losing their supremacy in carrying out this fundamental role is due to the changing information environment and media landscape, technological innovations, user expectations, and various economic issues.

Indeed, academic libraries in developing countries including Kenya have no option but to adopt business-like approaches in information management practices. The entrepreneurial approach to management shifts resources from one source to a more productive and effective source resulting in greater profit (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Libraries are operating in a new environment and community that forces them to advocate their own relevancy with competitors such as Google (Konata, 2006).

## Recent initiatives/innovative approaches

Information service providers whether in public, private or special libraries need to consider seriously the nature of space required to support learning, research, publishing and

community services. McDonald (2003) strongly suggests that:

Quite simply, good well-planned space enables the learning resource centre to fulfil its mission and underpins the development of all other resources. On the other hand, poor space often conflicts with what readers and service staff are trying to achieve and inhibits the learning resource centre's ability to fulfil its aims and objectives in an efficient way. More seriously, it can constrain the development of the service.

The concept of learning resource center as a new building type with distinctive qualities began in the UK in the late 1980s when a number of "new" universities built impressive spaces to significantly improve the quality of their learning and teaching support services (Brewer, 1997; Higher Education Design Quality Forum, 1996). These "premier" buildings were often the most distinguished on campus and some were designed by internationally renowned architects (McDonald, 2003).

Ideally, the new learning resource centers had different designs and objectives from conventional or traditional libraries. One author (Hellen, 2007) acknowledges that the changing media landscape and ongoing technological innovation are influencing the physical library premises creating a communication-based library rather than a collection-based one. The information society implies new web-based library services, access to electronic resources and information-rich products that require new forms of mediation. According to McDonald (2003) the learning resource centers placed greater emphasis on reader places, information technology, computing services, media centers, information skills rooms, learning development services, teaching

accommodation, and other learning. More recently, new learning resource centers have provided space for informal learning, group work, and laptop use, often with catering facilities.

In addition, accelerated learning and increased learning productivity are the next millennial library frontiers (Sweeney, 2005). Millennials approach learning differently and are more goal- and results-oriented than previous generations (Walker, 2006). This should be a consideration when designing and planning instruction sessions. Since this group is more team-oriented, focusing on "collaborative learning," libraries will need more group study space and tolerance for a slightly higher noise levels. Libraries should design tutorials with a game-like feel to interest as well as educate this group (Konata, 2006). There are many ways that collaborative technology and multitasking can be built to speed up and improve searching as well as learning. Sweeney (2007) adds that millennials will expect their educational opportunities to be based upon assessed knowledge, competency, and skill, not time spent on tasks or quantified in credit hours. They want their education to be more experiential, fun, collaborative, and game-like. Students want much more flexibility and learning options than just going to lectures, writing a paper, and taking a final exam.

Planning new space is essentially about people, or rather it is about creating the space in which people can interact with the collections, information technology and services they need. It is people who design libraries, people who deliver services and people who use them (McDonald, 2003). Recent design trends emphasize a "people-centered" approach to planning (Wu, 2003). Bazillion and Braun (1994) advises that:

Planning new learning space is about creating the physical environment to support the teaching, learning and research aspirations of the institution, not only for the immediate future, but also for succeeding generations of users. As a rule, the best libraries result from a strong shared vision and good communication between everyone involved in the planning process, particularly the librarian and the architect. Above all, the library manager must have a strong vision for the nature of the new space and has the important responsibility of communicating this vision to all those involved in the planning and design process. Indeed, this vision should inspire the design process.

The most important thing is to grasp the vision of the current information environment and implement it for the benefit of the present and future information audience. Hellen (2007) explains that globalization of information and communication technology has changed the classic library and its building. While some suggest that libraries as physical places are as good as “dead” because of the ever-increasing number of digital and web-based information, others are equally confidently planning and providing new facilities and services such as interactive library spaces and libraries without books.

Universal access to knowledge is still a compelling future. There are still many reasons people love their libraries in spite of the many alternative sources of information and entertainment available today (Sweeney, 2005).

In the current information environment, providing relevant, timely and accurate information products and services is imperative if academic libraries are to meet the needs and demands of the current generation of information audience. The current information environment is characterized by a unique type of information audience with varied information needs and demands namely: the millennial generation. One author Sweeney (2005) notes that: they’re variously called the Internet Generation, Echo Boomers, the Boomlet, Nexters, Generation Y, the Nintendo Generation, the Digital Generation, and, in Canada, the Sunshine Generation. Millennials are those born between 1977 and 1994 and are the second largest population group after the Baby Boomers (Zou and Konata, 2007).

According to Sweeney (2005) the millennial generation are impatient, better educated, digital natives who read less, want more selectivity in their products and services, expect to earn more than their parents, play video games more often than they watch TV, prefer learning experientially, and already know that they don’t want to live and work like their parents’ generation. In addition, they make up the demographic tsunami that will permanently and irreversibly change the library and information landscape.

According to Sweeney (2005), millennials collaborate in school work, in sports, extra-curricular activities. Technology allows them to interact with each other more often and in more depth than any generation before them.

Millennials are nomadic and communicate anywhere and at anytime and expect their technology to be mobile. Millennials are looking for an ultimate portable device that integrates all of the functionality of laptops, telephones, cameras, video games, and TVs, and expect technologies to offer one-stop shopping for all their needs.

Millennials are more effective at multitasking than previous generations. Frequently, a group of students will work together at a table in the library; and at the same time several of them will have cell phones, chat with others at the table, and work on wireless laptops. Likewise, the Kenyan millennial generation requires their academic libraries or learning resource centers to offer one-stop shopping for all their information and technology needs.

### **Academic libraries in Kenya**

In the recent past there has been an increased trend for universities in the UK and USA to build new learning resource centers or refurbish existing libraries. More recently, developing countries have adopted the same trend. For example, in Kenya, the United States International University (USIU) has already built a modern library and information center the only one so far in Eastern Africa. The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) state-of-the-art learning resource center is expected to be completed soon. The aim of CUEA’s learning resource center is to deliver high quality learning resource to support excellence in learning, teaching,

and research across the university as well as support the university in its community service within the AMECEA region. CUEA’s LRC includes several components namely: information communication technology center, library, multimedia center, e-publishing center, language center, e-conference facility, electronic museum and archive, bookshop and catering services.

Many authors agree on the changing nature of the information environment which calls for new technology skills and competencies on the part of information professionals (Omekwu, 2006; Omekwu and Eteng, 2006). According to Bawden (2005), apart from the traditional skills of information organizations, library and information science (LIS) professionals are expected to be firmly grounded in ICT-related competencies such as computing skills, web design, Internet searching and evaluation of digital information. Information professionals need to possess the requisite knowledge, skills, and competencies to be equal partners in their organizations. Information professionals must be ready to move with the challenges of digital technology, globalized information access, networked resources, a changing economy, new learning and research systems, and the demands of the user communities for information that adds value to their work (Omekwu and Eteng, 2006). Information professionals in academic libraries in Kenya can master the use of ICT systems and other competencies through motivation, encouragement, and additional training. This can be easily achieved and implemented if Information Science Schools can upgrade their courses. In addition, information professionals can acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies by attending conferences, seminars, and workshops.

Technological innovations have prevented the possibility of automating all aspects of the traditional library. In addition, technological innovation has affected the role and responsibilities of information professionals, changed working relationships and communication patterns as well as provided additional functions and services to existing services. Omekwu (2006) discusses the impacts of the information technology revolution on

libraries and emerging issues like globalization, and digitization among others. The same could be said of other technology developments including the Internet and systems such as RFID. With these developments, academic libraries in Kenya are in a position to offer information services around the clock.

Information professionals still need to help and encourage millennials in the effective use and access of information and knowledge using ICT. This group is very technologically savvy (Konata, 2006). Other studies have found that this group is at ease in communicating through instant messaging so continued library implementation of IM or other chat and social software should continue (Konata, 2006).

Academic libraries in Kenya need to integrate technological solutions into mainstream information products and services. These solutions include integrated information systems, digital information systems, computing, RFID, and local area and wide area networks. Technological innovation is not well grounded in academic libraries in Kenya and few academic libraries have integrated the necessary technology such as: USIU Library, CUEA Library among others.

Globally, information service providers in public, private and special libraries have embarked on a lifelong process of digitizing their information resources. Existing literature reveals consistent efforts made by university libraries to create and develop institutional repositories (Tyler and Walters, 2007; Stringer-Hye, 2005).

In Africa, the University of Pretoria in South Africa has created and developed a successful IR. The University of Nairobi has already embarked on the process of creating and developing its IR. Recently, on 18-20th March, 2009, more than 33 information professionals from public, private, and special organizations attended a workshop on Digital Institutional Repositories organized by the Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library, at the University of Nairobi. The workshop "Digital Institutional Repository" was organized by Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library in conjunction with International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) and brought together

information professionals from public, private, and special libraries. As librarians become committed stewards of their universities' digital resources, they are organizing, preserving, providing access to, and creating rights management systems as part of their daily responsibilities (Tyler and Walters, 2007). At the close of the seminar, the participants unanimously agreed to champion the creation and development of IRs in their institutions. Information professionals must constantly engage in an ongoing process of creating, developing, monitoring, evaluating, assessing, and revising the available information products and services of their libraries and universities.

If academic libraries are to be proactive in the delivery of information services, then they need to provide a wide range of relevant information products and services, and the ability to customize or personalize existing information products and services. In turn, the information audience expects to choose from many alternative sources and formats.

A number of approaches have already been applied by academic libraries to provide information audience with alternative information products and services. For example, in Kenya, public and private university libraries as well as special organizations have joined hands in conjunction with INASP's Program for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI) initiatives to provide various online databases.

The university information environment in Kenya and other parts of the world is in flux in terms of: information audience needs and demands, the information profession, information products and services, and the design of library buildings.

There has been increased professional speculation and debate about the end of the library as a physical "place" because of digital and web-based information.

Establishing and developing relationships with users is imperative if academic libraries and information professionals are to meet the needs of the millennial generation. Libraries will have to improve facility accommodations with group study space and incorporate social software

such as IM, blogs, online chat, and Wikis into library instruction and reference services. Academic libraries in Kenya will continue to adopt innovative approaches to manage information. Additionally, they will need to adopt a business-like approach to market their information products and services. This will require constant monitoring and evaluation of trends facing the information environment. Generally, libraries should not only be seen as dealing with books but also as a one-stop shopping center that utilizes appropriate technology to provide an array of information products and services.

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