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Perspectives on university library automation and national development in Uganda

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Abstract

Academic libraries in universities store large volumes of research that can be used for development purposes to support teaching, learning, research, innovation, community outreach and partnerships. Library automation incorporates the adoption of integrated library systems. Effective adoption of an integrated library system enables broad-based access to global and local knowledge sources to solve local, regional and national development challenges. Using a sequential mixed methods approach in a case study of a Ugandan public university, Kyambogo University, this study investigated the perceptions of librarians, information workers and other university stakeholders with respect to library automation and the contribution thereof to national development. The results confirmed that the integrated library system improved library operations and played an important role in supporting national development. This study also highlights the continued challenges of adopting an integrated library system in developing countries such as Uganda, which, if addressed, could further improve information service delivery for a nation's socio-economic transformation.

Keywords

Academic library, access to information, integrated library systems, Kyambogo University, library automation, national development, technology adoption, Uganda, university library

Introduction

Academic libraries in universities store large volumes of research conducted at universities and other research institutions that can be used for development, support teaching, learning, research, innovation, community outreach and partnerships (Bossaller and Atiso, 2015: 26). As such public – and private – academic libraries can play a central role in the collection and dissemination of both international and local content by providing access not only to students, faculty and researchers but also to the broader community and society.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are central in facilitating the effective storage, communication and dissemination of information. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) declared that: 'local authorities should play a major role in the provision of ICT services for the benefit of their populations' (WSIS, 2003). Fostering digital opportunities strengthens capacities for scientific research, information sharing, cultural creations and exchanges of knowledge (UNESCO, 2005). The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2016) further believes that increasing access to information and knowledge across society with the help of available ICTs greatly supports sustainable development and contributes to improving people's lives. ICTs hold the potential to bridge socio-economic divides (Bossaller and Atiso, 2015: 27) and those in positions of authority have a responsibility to do so.

Library automation is the direct application of ICT to library functions such as acquisition, circulation, cataloguing and serials control (Amekuedee, 2005). Libraries automate their library services using integrated library systems (ILS) to improve efficiency and enhance access to library resources (Webber and Peters, 2010). The effective adoption of ICTs such as an ILS in academic libraries will 'accelerate the level of knowledge acquisition and consequently improve national development' (Ani et al., 2005: 706).

Librarians and information workers were among the first to realise the importance of the Internet in the provision of information services to the public (De Saules, 2007: 5). Librarians therefore partly fuelled the expansion in the quantity and communicability of information by adopting ICTs such as the ILSs and the Internet in their libraries. The libraries' ability to make information available electronically directly facilitates interaction with information seekers in a more cost-effective manner (Amekuedee, 2005: 442). Individuals thus play an important role in ICT adoption and this is reflected in virtually all technology adoption models, such as the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use in Davis et al.'s (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and in Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations (DoI) theory.

The purpose of this article is to determine the perceptions of the librarians and information workers involved in library automation and other stakeholders in Uganda with respect to library automation and the contribution thereof to national development. This paper is structured as follows: after a discussion of the role of universities in Africa and Uganda, a brief history of library automation is presented. Thereafter the methodology of the study, the results and a discussion follows. We conclude the paper with the key perspectives on the role of library automation on national development.

The role of universities in Africa and Uganda

The former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, stated that, 'The university must become a primary tool for Africa's development in the 21st century' (Annan, 2005). According to Sutz (2005: 53): 'To increase their contribution to development through the production and distribution of knowledge, universities in developing countries need to transform themselves into developmental universities'. Among others, such developmental universities must clarify, analyse and solve local, regional and national problems in partnership with government, industry, community and other research organizations and make resulting developmental knowledge available and accessible to the broader society regardless of socio-economic status (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2015, 2016).

The African Union (AU) agreed on a set of goals that all African countries are expected to achieve by 2063 (African Union Commission, 2015: 5). Rooted in pan-Africanism, Agenda 2063 provides a robust framework for addressing past injustices and the necessary infrastructure that supports accelerated integration and growth, technological transformation and development through African integration. In an effort to develop the capacity of Africa's citizens to be effective change agents for the continent's sustainable development as envisioned by the AU and its Agenda 2063, the African Union Commission has developed an Africa

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