

STAFF USER INTERACTION IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Librarians have not shown any serious concern on the problem that usually arises between library staff and patrons in the course of their daily interactions. The primary aim of the research was to investigate the issues of conflict between staff and users at the University of Ilorin library. The study aims at helping library supervisors and managers who are policy makers to make more informed decision when dealing with issues of concern to staff user relationship. The questionnaire was the major instrument used to elicit information from 245 users of the University of Ilorin Library. The study reveals areas of conflicts and offers recommendations.

Introduction

It is not out of place to re-echo the fact that the University library is the heart of the institution, the mind of the society, the only effective repository of intellectual and racial memory (Aloh, 1998). However, the staff of the library means a lot by the efficient services can be offered to user. This aside, the provision of adequate resources and facilities in terms of books, journals, documents, and so on, are essential. Seating accommodation and other items including the type of library policies, rules and regulations have some impact on the type and level of services rendered and to some extent dictate the level of friction that may arise between staff and library users.

It is necessary to make some clarifications of some terms or concepts that will come up frequently in this article. They include grievance, conflict, disagreement, and quarrel. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English International Student Edition (1978) defines grievance as "a report of or course of complaint, especially of unjust treatment, conflict" disagreement, argument, quarrel" disagreement – "expression of different opinion, quarrel slightly" and quarrel as "an argument; a case fore or point of disagreement" for purpose of the article, these works will be used interchangeably to mean the same thing. When people interact, it is usual to have grievance, some disagreement or degree of conflict. Filoppo and Binwal (1966) explained that grievance includes any form of discount or dissatisfaction. The authors distinguished between grievances and complaints by saying a complaint is a discontent or dissatisfaction which has not, as yet assumed a great measure of importance to the complainant. What is important here is not the clarification but the acceptance of the fact that the existence of any of the concepts constitutes a threat to cordial relationship and interaction between people in organizations, the library inclusive. The remark by Filippo and Binwal (1966) on an aspect of conflict is relevant to this article. He stated that conflict occurs when two or more people or groups perceive that they have

incompatibility of goals and interdependence of activity and this can be seen in staff–user relationship or interactions. They both have some value that conflict. Librarians, supervisors and library managers have to be concerned with all forms of discontents between staff and users, regardless of personal opinion of their validity. One has to watch for even unexpressed dissatisfaction between library managers, conflict among people library staff and user, will occur (Andrews, 1991).

The primary aim of the research was to investigate the issues of conflict in pertinent areas of interactions between staff and user at the University of Ilorin library. The intention was to help library supervisors and manager who are policy makers to make more informed decisions when dealing with issues of concern to staff-user relationship. The author wanted to know:

- 1) The adequacy of infrastructural facilities in the library in term of seating accommodation and environmental conditions.
- 2) The effect of library policies, rules and regulations on library user and the implementation on the part of staff with a view to determining the impact on the relation between staff and users.
- 3) How often users succeed in getting required materials in the library.
- 4) The adequacy or otherwise of library resource, such as books, journals, magazines, and so on.
- 5) The incidence and obvious causes of disagreement between staff and users and steps taken by both parties in such situation.
- 6) The opinion of users on the issues of conflict between staff and user and what could be done to reduce them to barest minimum.

Methodology

Sample: The sample for the study consisted of 245 users who that have spent two academic sessions in the University of Ilorin and have made use of the library regularly. The sample was selected using simple random sampling technique.

Research Instrument: A researcher designed questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire contained seventeen items. Before the questions were drawn, the author observed for some few days the interactions between staff and students in the public service areas, particularly the circulation postgraduate /research room, and the documents unit, including the public catalogue area. This observation was carried out unnoticed by both staff and users. To a large extent, this informed the type of questions designed for respondents.

Though not distinctly shown in the questionnaire, the questions focused on six main sections. Section A dealt with the sex of respondent, marital status, student/staff, if student, what level and if staff academic or non academic? The second section (B) focused on the frequency of using the library and whether there was any form of disagreement with library staff during the course of using the library. In section three (C), all respondents were asked to state their opinion on the adequacy of the opening hours of the Library, and if found inadequate a question sought for the steps taken by such respondents. In section four (D) a question was designed to obtain

information on whether students do succeed in locating books they have identified in the catalogue on the shelf. Andrews (1991) observed that while Librarian know that students encounter problems when trying to use academic libraries, it is possible that professional training and expertise inhibit a full understanding of the problem and that large academic libraries can be intimidating for students.

For section four, questionnaire items elicited information on what action respondents took when they were unable to locate a book on the shelf. The alternative responses dealt with the eagerness of staff to assist such respondents. Experience has shown that number of disagreement had occurred due to lack of understanding between staff and users when books were not located as identified by the catalogue.

The fifth section was concerned with the adequacy of the library in the area of ventilation, resources (in term of multiple copies of essential books), and the section was provided to allow respondents to give their free expression on the issue of disagreement and conflict between staff and users in the University Library. To make the filling of the forms easy, most of the questions were followed by responses from which user were asked to choose one that accurately represented their point of view.

Data Collection Procedure

A total of 245 copies of the questionnaire out of 260 which were administered were returned, giving a response rate of 94 percent 231 (94.2 percent) were returned fully completed, while 14 (5.8 percent) were returned only partially completed. The question which exhibited the highest non-competition rate (excluding the 'Yes' or 'No' questions) was the question where respondents were asked to indicate if the present library opening hour was adequate. Expectedly, response rate to such question were low simply because they carried 'Yes' or 'No' response.

Data Analysis

Because of the nature of the data collected both quantitative and qualitative statistical analysis were used in the study.

Results

Profiles of respondents

The following results were found:

- More than 70 percent respondents are male.
- Nearly all the respondents (91 percent) are single only few nine percent were married.
- There is evidence that students constitute the highest users of the Library, with almost all (94 percent) responding to the questionnaire.
- Although all the responding students out across the different levels, that is, 200-600 and postgraduate, 200 level students constitute the highest respondents (34 percent).
- The results show that 232 respondents answered the first question. Of this, 124 (53 percent) used the Library at least once a week. These data show that majority of the respondents (88 percent) are active

users of the Library. This also suggests that majority of the respondents are conversant with the rules and regulation governing the use of the library, its resources and facilities.

- Evidence from the 234 respondents showed that slightly less than 30 percent had disagreement with library staff during the course of using the library.
- As indicated by respondents who had disagreed with library staff at one time or the other, the most common cause of conflict was over the number of books to borrow, while payment of fines on overdue books rated second and lack of access to certain categories of materials rated third. It should be noted, however, that the aggregate response to this did not agree with the number that indicated having disagreement with library staff. Interestingly, more respondents reported the different types of disagreement they had with library staff.

Library Opening Hours

- Although more than 50 percent of the responses revealed that the library opening hours was inadequate, 42 percent felt the hours needed no adjustment.
- The respondents who felt the opening hours should be adjusted indicated that they made no official report to library management but to library assistants, who simply replied that it was not possible to extend the time of closing the library.
- Majority of respondents 74 (32 percent) felt the library should extend its closing from 10pm to 11pm during examination period.

Locating Books on the Shelf

- Though responses to the question was not total, the highest response showed that respondents were not always successful in locating books on the shelf, even though the records were available in the catalogue.
- Further analysis revealed that when books were not located, a large number of respondents reported trying some other time, while a few gave up the search, and very few cared to report their unsuccessful attempts to library staff.
- When unsuccessful attempts were reported to library staff, findings revealed that over 50 percent of users were assisted by staff.

Assessment of the Library

- Of the total response of 207 users, 82 (39 percent) reported the adequacy of the library in terms of space, while 76 (36 percent) indicated that the library was inadequately stocked with multiple copies of essential books.
- Analysis of responses indicated that the library is rated low in terms of current books and toilet facilities for users.

Comments on Ways to Avoid Frictions

Respondents were asked to comment on the topic or issues involved in interaction between staff and students and how friction or quarrel could be avoided or reduced in future interactions. A variety of pertinent points

emerged from the comments. Some however, were elaboration of the questions. After a careful scrutiny of the various comments offered, they were synthesized and broadly classified as follows:

1. **Closing Time:** Comments of users on this have shown that the issue of closing the library before the normal time came under attack. There is lack of understanding on the part of users on this issue of closing the library before the stipulated time. The university library, as a matter of policy opens between 8am and 10pm weekday, 8am and 1pm on Saturday and 5pm – 10pm on Saturday and closes to users on public holidays. However, as a result of constant power interruptions or total power outage, the library had been forced to close before the usual time. Respondents expressed their feelings by saying that when the library had to close before 10pm they encountered difficulty in finding another library to use. Even library staff on their part closed the library with the greatest reluctance. This calls for understanding on the part of users as the cause of closure at such times was beyond the control of the library. Evidence from the comments revealed that closure decisions had created conducive environment for conflict between staff and users.

2. **Inadequate Assistance to Users:** Respondents felt that the assistance offered users when they were unable to locate books on the shelf was inadequate. Comments revealed that this is the most cited source of conflict between staff and users. Most users have no sound knowledge of using the library. The university library on its part conducts library orientation for fresher at the early weeks of resumption but experience has shown that students would not have realized the importance of the exercise, hence they usually display lackadaisical attitude towards the programme. Also, there is a compulsory course for all first year undergraduates on the use of library.

3. **Collection of Fines on Overdue Books:** This is also a source of quarrel between staff and students users. This library policy on overdue books is evoked after the expiration of the two-week loan period (for undergraduate postgraduate and staff loan period is four-weeks. Respondents' comments have rated this point high as a source of conflict. Fulippo and Binwal (1995) observed that it is necessary and import to apply the system of fines because it regulates overdue borrowing.

4. **Close Access to Certain Materials:** Users comment focused of the difficulty involved in accessing serials and old issues of newspapers in the library. As summed up by a respondent "in most cases we were denied access". The library allows only postgraduate and researchers access to both the serials and documents room. However, with the expressed permission of the heads of units, final year undergraduates are allowed access. This measure was put in place as a result of the serious damage done to most of the journals. This act suggests that at their level they have not appreciated the importance of research materials in a higher education set up. However, the restrictions placed on the use of the materials had in a number of times threatened peace in the library as undergraduates who let themselves in are sent out when discovered.

5. **Loan Duration:** The loan duration or period of two weeks for undergraduate also came under severe attack. This constitutes an area of friction and students repeatedly cited the period as "too short".

6. **Inadequate Multiple Copies:** Here, users have some concern in the area of inadequate copies of certain heavily required books. However, a copy of such vital book is usually placed on short loan collection. Users on hourly basis consult the books but the management of the short loan collection according to users gives room for disagreement once a while as books are recalled when still being consulted by users.

On the whole, large number of respondents decried the absence of a suggestion box in the library. The respondents suggested that the presence of such a box would enable users put their views and suggestions across to library management and these would go a long way in averting constant feud between staff and library users.

Interviews and Observations

Using these methods – interviews and observations the researcher was able to elicit more information on the main areas of concern to this study. After a careful look at the questionnaire responses there is clear evidence that library users interact more with circulation staff and the security staff than any other group of staff or individuals. This prompted the author to seek further clarifications on certain responses of users. A total of 10 staff covering the two categories named above accepted to be interviewed.

Interview confirmed that disagreement with users occur in the process of using the library and its resources. Almost all staff interviewed agreed that quarrels arise in the major areas listed below in order of magnitude.

1. Closing time
2. Collection of fines on overdue books
3. Use of short loan collections
4. Use of postgraduate and documents room
5. Checking at the exit.

From further explanations by staff, it is noticed that almost all students find it difficult to comply with library rules and regulations as contained in the Library Guide published by the library and made available to all registered library users. There is also the lack of understanding on the part of students when the library had to close due to erratic supply of electricity. The interviewees agreed that this issue is the most important and needs urgent attention.

Observation of the part of the author revealed the lack of toilet facilities for users. There were instance when users forced themselves into staff toilet; an attempt to stop the students from using the toilet sometimes nearly resulted in chaos.

Conclusion

Having identified the causes of conflict between staff and users of the University of Ilorin Library, it may be concluded that the cause of disagreement between staff and users of University libraries in Nigeria may not be far from the findings of this study as earlier enumerated in this work.

Recommendations

If conflicts between staff and students in the University of Ilorin library is to reduce, there is the urgent need to ensure that the power generating set installed in the University should function at all times to put an end to closing the library before 10pm.

Opening hours of the library could be extended, that is from 8a.m to 11.p.m, especially during examination periods. In actual fact, it needs to be recognized that opening hours of academic libraries should be under continuing review because of pressure of work on both staff and students.

Circulation services are very important to users. There is need to modify circulation arrangements from time to time. Attention should focus on the short loans collection and loan period, particularly for the undergraduates. Finally, a clear line of communication should be opened up between users and library authority. A simple way of doing this is mounting of suggestion boxes in strategic locations within the library.

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