Graduate Students' Perception and Utilization of Research Commons (RCs) in the University of Ghana Central Library (Balme Library), Legon

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ABSTRACT

The paper mainly focused on graduate research students' needs and expectations in terms of use of facilities and services of a Research Commons (RCs) at the University of Ghana, Legon. The study used survey research design. Data collection methods used was a convenient sampling to select a sample size of 200 out of 1,460 registered graduate student patrons of the RCs. In all, 190 completed questionnaires were retrieved, giving a response rate of 95%. The study shows that, on the whole, the RCs established barely six months ago is a great success and is putting the library back at the centre of graduate learning and research at the University of Ghana.
Keywords: *Research Commons, University of Ghana, Balme Library, Students' Perception*

INTRODUCTION

For some years now, librarians at the University of Ghana central library (Balme Library) have observed that the expectations of graduate students and faculty about the library's resources seemed to be one of negative. The general perception has been that the library is stocked with very old books, while the journal shelves look almost empty of new and current journals. The result of this perception is that few graduate students and faculty do patronize the library. On October 25, 2012 the University of Ghana central library (Balme Library) inaugurated a two million dollar (US$2m) grant library project, the "Research Commons" sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, to enhance academic output of graduate students and researchers of the University of Ghana.

The Research Commons (RCs) is located on the first floor of the east wing within the central library (Balme Library). The purpose of the Research Commons, among other services is to provide access to a state of the art technology, access to a number of software office applications and hardware facilities such as laptops, laser printing, digital projector and screen as well as scanners. The facility also offers comfortable workplace for contemplation, research, preparing and rehearsing presentations and discussions and a relaxed seating area, where a researcher could have a cup of tea or coffee. The library, in addition to the grant, was presented with additional seed money of 1.5m dollars from its benefactors for the initial management of the facility. The Research Commons therefore attempts to assemble groups and expertise now distributed throughout the various campuses of the university by blending technology with current traditional resources to serve as a centre for a wide range of scholarly activities.

With the advent of new and emerging information and communication technologies, and the evolving role of libraries in the scholarly communication process, academic libraries have the opportunity and the obligation to position themselves as central to the intellectual and educational mission and goals of their universities. The need to evaluate the facilities and services at the Research Commons cannot therefore be overemphasized. According to Stewart (2012), strategic management requires internal assessment, benchmarking, for connecting outcomes-based evidence of the academic library's contribution to the broader strategic goals of the parent institution. In the view of Modepalli (2010), any library irrespective of its type, should be user-oriented since all the services provided by the library are intended to benefit users.

The importance of periodically evaluating a library service cannot be overemphasized. In the view of Sahu et. al (2012), it is imperative on the part of library professionals and Library and Information Science (LIS) researchers to conduct user assessment on library services periodically to find out the ratings of the library services, rate of satisfaction among the user groups, and find out solutions for upgrading existing library services. The ultimate objective of any library and information centre is to provide the best and highest number of services for its users. If the library fails to achieve its users' satisfaction, it will be faced with the problem in its own existential philosophy (Opoku, 2012a.). In fact, without evaluation one cannot express the certainty or uncertainty of users' satisfaction with the services provided by the library. Evaluating the provided services exposes the users' views and satisfaction with the status quo and their expectations of library servicing (Opoku, 2012b.).

Quality assurance demands that, libraries from time-to-time need to be assessed, and evaluated by its users. The users' satisfaction is considered to be a reliable benchmark for determining library effectiveness. Users' information needs are met in an effective way by providing standard but suitable library services that they need. Users' assessment can provide invaluable information to libraries in re-orienting their collections, services and activities for effectively meeting their information needs (Fidzani, 1998). Periodic collection assessment is also necessary to determine to what extent library collections are relevant, current and adequate in meeting the information needs of users (Osburn, 1992).

Technology is redefining the library landscape. As a result, libraries are re-evaluating their present systems and collections in an effort to seek out opportunities to provide their patrons with the best possible access to their collective resources (Halveson and Platas, 2006). According to Moyo (2004), academic libraries are the leaders of technological innovation within academic institutions because they are at the centre of research and scholarship. One of the main challenges of academic libraries is that users are getting more and more self-sufficient in accessing online resources, which is alienating them from the library and staff (Breivik and Gordon, 2006). Academic libraries therefore need to devise means of keeping users connected and engaged with the library so that they continue to learn and apply the full capabilities of resources and services offered, while at the same time recognize that there are quality resources offered by the library (Moyo, 2004). As the ways in which graduate studies evolve, so their expectation of the services provided by

libraries and librarians are evolving too. Librarians in academic libraries also have expectations of their own and face a perpetual challenge to ensure that the services they provide align as neatly as possible with the new and diverse needs of graduate students (Remple and Davidson, 2008). In recognizing the range of graduate students' proficiency in library research, librarians must also address the fact that the level of information literacy expected of graduate students is much different from that expected of undergraduates. Smith (2003) therefore proposes a model for graduate-level library research that includes various search strategies in order to guide graduate students in carrying out exhaustive literature searches. Research at the graduate level therefore requires the sophisticated use of specialized information sources, and involves synthesis of information from various stages of the scholarly communication process, that is, primary, secondary, and tertiary sources (Smith, 2003).

Though academic libraries have played critically important roles in supporting teaching, learning and research, technological developments and the availability of information resources online have changed how research is done, and also the services that academic libraries provide to their research communities (Jabb and Green, 2007). In examining library advocacy in the campus environment, Zanoni and Mandermack (2010) observe that the academic library's vision is informed by the institution it serves. If the library cannot fulfill its role of optimizing access to information in support of the institutional mission of fostering research and discovery, teaching and learning, and service and engagement, or if that information is more readily available elsewhere, the library risks losing its relevance.

With the advent and development of Information Technology (IT), institutions of higher learning and their libraries are dealing with what Britto (2011) describes as the "New Generation of Students in Higher Education" whose needs cannot be satisfied with traditional library services. These students also known as "digital natives", (Prensky, 2001), the "net generation", "generation Y" or even millennids, have not known a world without the Internet, and have an unprecedented fluency and comfort with technology in all aspects of their lives (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005). The problem has been further compounded by the outdated design of the traditional academic library, which discourages collaborative group work, access to food and drink within the library and flexible learning environment (Prensky, 2006).

The use of IT has effectively enabled libraries to contribute to education processes in different ways (Brazillion, 2001). This includes providing better accessibility to electronic information sources, helping academic staff use IT in their teaching and research activities, helping university staff increase their skills for using sophisticated information systems, and helping students search electronic sources and web pages (Mohsevzadeh and Isfandyavi-Moghaddan, 2009). Notwithstanding the importance of IT in libraries as highlighted in the literature above, the success of any Research Commons (RCs) and its services is however, predicted on continually updating and revising its functions and services in tandem with the dynamic needs and practices of its patrons (Cowgill et al, 2001). Accordingly, formative evaluation must be an integral component of the implementation and maintenance plan for

a Research Commons (RCs) (Britto, 2011). It is therefore imperative to conduct user studies in order to improve the existing library resources and services. The objectives of the study are:

i   To ascertain the graduate students' perception and use of the Research Commons.
ii   To evaluate the use of the facilities at the Research Commons.
iii   To identify the level of satisfaction of the graduate students with the services provided at the Research Commons.
iv   To examine any problems and challenges faced by the students in using the facilities at the Research Commons.
v   To record the suggestions made by the graduate students for further improvement of the facilities and services at the Research Commons.

METHOD

The study used a survey data collection method to select sample subjects. The subjects of the study were 1,460 registered graduate student patrons from an average daily visit of 65 graduate students to the Research Commons. The study was conducted over a period of two weeks (15th - 28th March, 2013). Keeping the objectives of the study in mind, a well-structured questionnaire was prepared and copies distributed among the graduate students' respondents in person, as and when they visited and used the Research Commons. The convenient sampling method was used to select a sample size of 200. In all 190 completed questionnaires were retrieved, representing a response rate of 95%. Among them, 70 students were in the Arts and Humanities programme; 52 were in Business programmes; 45 were in Science and Engineering; and 23 were in Agriculture and Consumer Sciences. Data was analysed using simple percentages and frequency counts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Differing expectations and experiences play significant roles in students' formation of perceptions, and may at time supersede objective appraisals. Nonetheless, the perceptions are of great importance, and the libraries must determine how less either by addressing the perception itself or the underlying shortcoming. On the issue of services excellence, 65% of Science and Engineering students indicated that sometimes searching the database in the library e-resources did not provide them with relevant articles needed. The situation was a bit different among the Arts and Humanities students, where only 25.7% indicated they hardly find relevant articles in response to their search queries in the library e-resources.

A greater proportion of the Business students (59.6%) however, indicated that they find relevant articles. The overall results show that the respondents (Arts and Humanities, Business, Science and Engineering, Agriculture and Consumer Science Students) have a positive perception about the availability of relevant articles in the library's e-resources. In terms of level of satisfaction with specific facilities at the Research Commons, table 1 shows that majority of respondents are greatly satisfied with the facilities and services at the Research Commons. On their general impression about the facilities at the Research Commons, majority of respondents described the facilities and services at the Research

Commons as excellent and amazing. The ambient environment, the discussion rooms, easy access to printers and photocopiers, access to varied and relevant databases for research are just wonderful. To most of the graduate students, establishment of the Research Commons has really enhanced their research work and restored their hope in the library.

A respondent described the facilities at the Research Commons as unimaginable amazing, and a plus to the parent university within the context of a developing nation south of the Sahara. Three quarter of the respondents however, expressed their utter dissatisfaction over the slowness of the Internet speed especially during the rush hours of between 9.00a.m. and 11.00a.m. It is therefore suggested that the library should upgrade its bandwidth to enhance its Internet speed. The graduate students want the library environment to mirror the technology-driven information environment of a world class university library. The study however, revealed that some of the graduate students 92(48%) lack understanding and skills regarding how knowledge is organized, locate, retrieve and use needed information adequately, as they were not always up-to-date with library tools and new technologies for research (Opoku, 2013).

Concerning their views on the impact of the Research Commons, 129(68%) of respondents said access to numerous and relevant online journal article databases, and the conducive discussion rooms have greatly enhanced their research work. Overall, 108(57%) of respondents said they have been taught by the library staff how to search online article databases. Hitherto they were deficient in reviewing relevant literature for their theses and long essays. Some respondents indicated that upon using the facilities at the Research Commons their supervisors are beginning to commend them for submitting many better theses chapters. Though complaints had traditionally been regarded as negative responses from dissatisfied people and that most management had tried to prevent and reduce them to the lowest level, studies in service marketing consider negative responses as useful feedback and as "indispensable indication of unsatisfactory performance" (Phau and Sari, 2004). Understanding of customer complaining behaviour and handling the complaints effectively "can increase customer commitment to the library, build customer loyalty, and satisfy the customers (Oh, 2003).

The respondents however, identified some challenges in using the facilities at the Research Commons. They complained of frequent power outage, as at the time of the study the library did not have a standby generator to restore power when the national grid goes off. Respondents also complained about clashes in online booking for the use of a discussion room. A prospective user of a discussion room, or a laptop had to book for the facility in advance online at libguides.ug.edu.gh, indicating a slotted time period of use. The study however revealed that, sometimes a user of a particular discussion room is not willing to give up the seat even when his/her time is up for the facility to be reassigned to a new user. This could sometimes generate unnecessary argument between the outgoing user and the incoming user, calling for the intervention of the Electronic Resource Librarian. The computers at the Research Commons did not have installation of Statistical Softwares like SPSS and Metlab to be used by student for their research data analysis. The establishment of the Research Commons at the University of Ghana, like what pertains in

well developed academic libraries requires as re-conceptualization of the roles of the librarians at the University of Ghana, what Bell and Shank (2004) have referred to as "blended librarian" - A librarian who is well versed in both print and online tools, and who has the compliment of the traditional skill set of librarianship and the information and instructional technology knowledge and skills to effectively support and enhance the teaching and learning process for students and faculty alike. The service model of Research Commons requires more library staff-student interaction with a computer. Consequently when asked to evaluate the staff at the Research Commons, majority of respondents 121(636%) described the staff as supportive, dedicated, smart, and highly skilled in their duties. Most respondents said, initially their perception got in the way of the staff instructing them on what they need to know about library tools and new technologies for research work (Opoku, 2013).

Table 1: Level of Satisfaction with the RC Facility/Services observed in this study

Facility/Service	Satisfied	%	Not Satisfied	(%)
General Environment	165	86.8	25	13.2
E-Resource/Databases	125	65.7	65	13.2
Internet Speed	98	25	142	75
Photocopying/Printing	162	85	28	15
Staff Support/Efficiency	143	75	47	25
Toiletry	68	35.7	122	64.3
Discussion Rooms	155	81.5	35	18.5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Research Commons (RCs) at the University of Ghana has been a grand success during its first six months of operation. This is shown by the frequently high patronage and visit to the Research Commons by graduate students. Users of the facility at the Research Commons have described the facilities as excellent, with highly committed and dedicated staff who readily assist students in their search and retrieval of information that has been the hallmark of an academic library (Whitchurch and Belliston, 2006). The establishment of the Research Commons has certainly transformed the University of Ghana central library into a vital force on the university campus by way of providing pathways to high-quality information and information sources. The spaces at the Research Commons are widely popular with students who are putting the University of Ghana central library back at the centre of campus life for graduate students (Britto, 2011). To safeguard its relevance and sustainability, the library needs to develop and strengthen its graduate user-education and instruction to develop among the graduate students the ability to access, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources. The library would therefore require dynamic, vibrant and skillful staff as navigational guides, helping users make discerning choices among materials available on the Internet (Bailey and Tierney, 2008). The library needs to invest, plan and continue to offer dedicated services to graduate students if the university is to achieve its goal of becoming a world class university. To offer more effective and efficient support and services to graduate research students in their research process, the library

needs to encourage a research-and-development mindset so that librarians understand that keeping up to date in these skills is an integral component of their professional responsibility (Gibbons, 2007). A standby generator should be procured, as a matter of urgency, and installed to restore power when the national grid goes off, to avoid unpleasant frequent power outages which disrupt students learning and research. There is also the need to improve upon the Internet and WIFI link to enhance Internet search.

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