

DELINQUENT READERS: A PROBLEM FOR UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

Abstract

Nigerian university libraries build their collection through purchase from book funds allocated to them in the annual university budget. In recent past, there have been drastic cuts in the amount allocated for this purpose, hence library collection development programmes have been greatly handicapped despite increase in students' population and expansion in course offerings.

Arising from the inadequacy in collection building and coupled with some socio-economic factors is a mounting but latent problem of reader delinquency in these libraries. Even though there is paucity of statistical evidence to expose the danger which readers' delinquent acts pose to Nigerian university libraries, there is no doubt that their threat to collection building is real. The university libraries are therefore well advised to grapple with this endemic menace of reader delinquency and devise means of stunting its growth.

Present situation

Without exception, all Nigerian university libraries depend on the following traditional methods of collection building: purchase, exchange, legal deposit, gifts, complimentary copies and membership of learned association. Of these, collection development (acquisitions) by purchase accounts for the greatest percentage of the library's holdings in the universities. Acquisition through the other methods have not been of much significance because:-

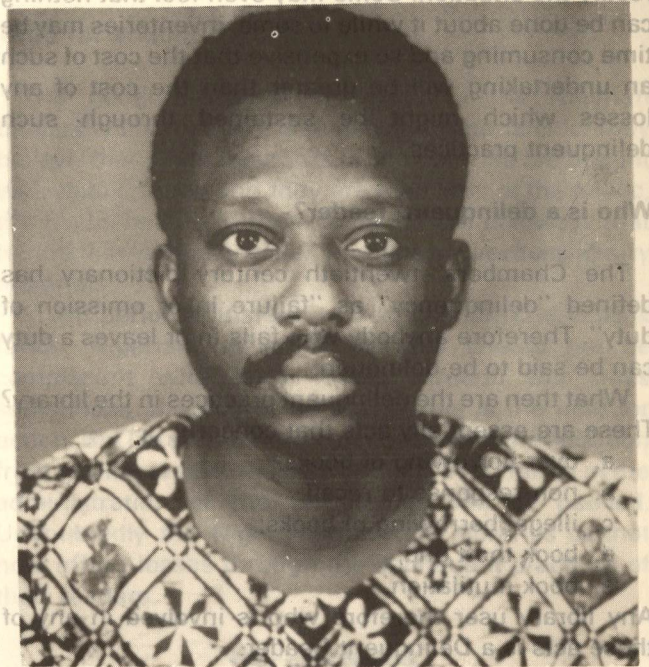
- a. the legal deposit ordinances are never obeyed and since the laws were enacted, the regions have given way to states and this has left everything in a confused state. It has thus compounded the problem of university libraries in acquiring materials through such depository laws.
- b. university libraries in Nigeria belong to few associations and societies on membership status.
- c. the number of libraries with which gifts and exchange agreements are made is small and very few copies of the gifts and exchange materials are worth adding to the collection. Furthermore, the gifts and exchanged materials are never on one to one basis.
- d. the complimentary copies are sent for advertisement or publicity or review only.

Therefore one can understand why Nigerian university libraries rely solely on building their collections through purchase.

The library budget

The fund for the purchase of library materials is provided for in the library's quota obtained from the university's annual budget.

The ALA standard recommendation as to what percentage of the university budget should go to the library is 4-5%. This allocation should increase if student population or course offerings expand. In fact, in a country such as Nigeria, where there is underdevelopment of other library infrastructure (i.e. special, public and school libraries), there is need for much more than the 4-5% recommended. However, due to historical and socio-economic factors, probably only a few of the university libraries actually get up to 3% of their parent institution's annual budget. The present



Benjamin O. Alafiatayo
Librarian I

Kashim Ibrahim Library, Ahmadu Bello
University, Zaria

economic recession being experienced in the country has even made the situation worse.

Therefore since all the Nigerian university libraries do most of their acquisitions from the library's quota in the university's annual budget, it is not surprising that most of these libraries are now handicapped in their collection development programmes.

Problem of delinquent practices

Arising from the inadequacy in collection building and coupled with some socio-economic factors is a mounting but latent problem of delinquent practices from the users of these university libraries. Delinquent readers are not peculiar to university libraries; they are a problem of all types of libraries. However, their activities may be so small that they are accepted and tolerated or even overlooked in some libraries. In some, the level might be so alarming that it requires the attention of the library authority, or administration.

In the last few years, librarians in the university have been worried about the deteriorating situation of delinquent acts by the users of these libraries. Surveys have been conducted in some university libraries particularly in Britain and the United States of America and these have exposed the danger posed by these anti-social acts. However, this writer is not aware of any similar surveys in any of the Nigerian university libraries, even though these libraries in no doubt experience considerable number of delinquent acts resulting in book losses. Unfortunately, there is paucity of statistical evidence to support this assertion. The reasons might be because of the natural hesitancy from the library authorities to discover the truth. For apart from its traumatic effect, a remedy must be found to rectify the situation. Some may even feel that nothing can be done about it while to some, inventories may be time consuming and so expensive that the cost of such an undertaking will be greater than the cost of any losses which might be sustained through such delinquent practices.

Who is a delinquent reader?

The Chambers' twentieth century dictionary has defined "delinquency" as "failure in or omission of duty". Therefore anybody who fails in or leaves a duty can be said to be delinquent.

What then are the delinquent practices in the library? These are essentially acts that concern:

- a. over-borrowing of books;
- b. non-response to recall;
- c. illegal borrowing of books;
- d. book theft and;
- e. book mutilation.

Any library user therefore who is involved in any of these acts is a Delinquent Reader.

Nigerian university library clientele

The major clientele of the Nigerian university libraries are the students (undergraduate and post graduate) and the staff (teaching and research). Many of the students are indigent. Despite the abolition of tuition fees in Nigerian universities, most of the students still find it difficult to pay the boarding and lodging fees. Those on scholarships or bursaries do not get paid in time. Some of the scholarships/bursaries do not even include book allowance or where it is included, it is very much inadequate.

The few students and may be some staff who can afford to buy books they need may not get the required books to buy in the bookshops due to the various restrictive measures that have been placed on book purchase from abroad by the government. The costs of these books are also exorbitant. The situation has therefore developed such that both staff and students depend heavily on the university libraries for their books and reading needs.

Austerity measures and book purchase

It has been mentioned earlier that the bulk of the Nigerian university library holdings are acquired

through purchase. Publishing is still in its infancy in this country and most of the publishing houses still focus their attention on publishing books for pre-university level. Majority of the books needed in the universities are therefore published overseas, hence book/journal purchases for the university libraries are mainly from abroad. An exercise that involves foreign exchange transactions which have been adversely affected by the foreign exchange control measures introduced by the government a few years ago. Things are even getting tighter now taking collection building a no easy task in the various university libraries.

The present financial austerity being experienced in the country has greatly affected the university libraries whose budgets particularly book funds have been drastically cut by the parent institutions. For example, a university library which had about 1.5 million naira as its book vote in 1974/75 can not now in 1982/83 boast of more than 0.4 million naira for the same purpose; an amount which is not even enough to service its current journal subscription.

Why delinquent?

Studies may reveal a multiple of factors which are influencing delinquent behaviours by readers in university libraries in Nigeria. These are the students' indigency, availability (or non-availability) of materials, sanctions e.g. fines, security (or non-security) of library buildings and the attitude of the readers.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, majority of the students do not have money to spare to buy books (that is if these are available in the bookshops). Majority therefore depend on the library for their book needs, a situation which leads to increase in intensity of use of the available materials in the library.

Recently the libraries have been experiencing cut backs in their book funds resulting in their purchase of very few additions to their book stocks. The availability of materials to cater for the upsurge of use by the clientele of the libraries has therefore not been guaranteed. The availability of materials to adequately cope with increase in students' population, expansion in course offerings and the establishment of new courses has been greatly curtailed by this inadequate funding. This may encourage delinquent acts for if items are not readily available when needed there will be more temptation to indulge in delinquent behaviours to secure access to them. In some of the libraries, sanctions such as fines for overdue books are allowed to pile up indefinitely such that readers are at the end discouraged or are even afraid to return such long overdue books.

Poor security encourages reader delinquency. Some of the university libraries have very many possible exits due to the configuration of their buildings. In a few cases, the windows are so low that the readers can virtually walk through with any library material particularly during power failures in the evenings which are not infrequent.

Most of the university libraries try to ensure what can be objectively described as good service. However, there are some readers whose delinquent behaviours are provoked basically by the selfish attitudes. These

readers have a selfish mental stance which identifies their needs as being greater than that of the university community. They do not see any wrong in their committing delinquent acts. They even try to justify their actions by thinking that they are not hurting any individual. To them, it is a library book which can be replaced anytime by that body (the library) which has enough funds to use - a belief which unfortunately does not hold true for the libraries for several years past.

Preventing delinquent acts

Anti-social acts in libraries are universal problem which is not possible to stamp out completely. However, they could be minimised.

The cause of most book losses is demand outstripping supply of library materials. If items are readily available when needed probably no reader will need to indulge in delinquent behaviour. The more there are books available, the less the temptation to steal, mutilate or even borrow illegally. A reader will be less unwilling to return a book if he knows that he will be able to regain possession of it or another copy without difficulty. So, delinquent acts could be curbed by increased availability. But can Nigerian university libraries afford multiple copies of books to the level required at this period of budget cuts?

The provision of easily accessible and relatively cheap photocopying facility will discourage book theft and book mutilation. A cumbersome and time wasting procedure for getting materials photocopied could get readers easily frustrated and such frustrations might lead to readers' indulgence in delinquent acts.

The university libraries should consider declaring amnesty (i.e. fine free) week on a more regular basis so as to encourage readers to return borrowed books however long overdue without imposition of fines. Such a measure will ensure the recovery of books which could have otherwise been lost.

More stringent security measures should be employed in Nigerian university libraries if delinquent acts are to be curbed. The security situation in many of the libraries does not appear to discourage delinquent behaviours of the readers. The present practice of guardsmen to control the exits does not seem an adequate preventive measure. The combined guards - turnstile and the electronic system of control of exits is a recommendable security installation to deter readers who might be tempted to be delinquent, particularly book theft. Intensified surveillance of possible unauthorised exits from the library should be given serious consideration so as to protect the library stock.

The university librarian or any of his officials should, when occasion presents itself, such as during the "freshmen library orientation talk", continue to appeal to the conscience of the potential library users on such malpractices. He should stress the great harm which such misdemeanours inflict on the library and other users who are deprived of the use of the stolen or mutilated materials. The cost of re-ordering, reclassifying, re-cataloguing etc. (that is if the title is not

out-of-print) should be highlighted so that the users appreciate the loss in terms of money, labour and time which such malfeasance could infest on the library.

Periodic searches of students' hostels and staff offices have served as great means of curtailing delinquent acts by staff and students of Nigerian universities. In one of the universities, such a surprise search conducted recently yielded a very good dividend. About 2,000 volumes of mainly illegally removed and long overdue books were recovered from the students' hostels! For effectiveness such raids should have the elements of surprise and secrecy. With the cooperation of the Students' Affairs Divisions of the various University Registries, there is no doubt that such surprise checks will always yield fruitful results.

Time for action

The general attitude of many of the Nigerian university library users is selfish and materialistic. They believe that since the books in the libraries are bought with public funds and they are members of the public, the books belong to them, hence there is always that temptation in them to pilfer, mutilate or over keep library materials.

In this period of austerity and consequent cuts in book funds, Nigerian university libraries should not be complacent with book losses through the crass selfishness of some of its users. This is the time for action. But librarians alone can not prevent the situation from getting worse; the help of those in authority in the administration of the universities will be needed. Undoubtedly the Nigerian university libraries cannot now afford losses through the delinquent practices of their readers.

REFERENCES

1. Arden, L. L. Disgrace Abounding: *New Lib. World* 73 (1972); 257-58.
2. Broadhead, R. M. Thefts, *New Lib. Word* 74 (1973); 236.
3. Macdonald, M. A. (ed) *Chambers twentieth century dictionary*, rev. ed. with suppl. Edinburgh: Chambers Ltd., 1977.
4. Nwamefor, Ralph. Security problems of university libraries in Nigeria: *Lib. Assoc. Rec.* 76 (1974): 244-45.
5. Off the cuff: *New Lib. Word* 73(1972); 144.
6. Revill, Don. The theft problem in libraries, *New Lib. World* 76(1975): 123-24.
7.Library security, *New Lib. World* 79(1978); 75-7.
8. Roberts, Matt. Guards, turnstiles, electronic devices and the illusion of security. *Coll. & Res. Lib.* 29(1968); 259-75.
9. Scheffrin, Rita A. The barriers to and barriers of security; *Wilson Lib. Bull.* 45(1971); 870-78.
10. Souter, G. H. Delinquent readers: a study of the problem in university libraries; *Journal of Librarianship* 8(1976); 96-110.