UbuntuNet CONNECT 2017

A Pilot Survey on Institutional Enablers and Barriers Affecting the Evolving Role of Librarians in African Higher Educational Institutions

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Background and Motivation

African higher education institutions (HEIs), like many in this sector worldwide, are experiencing a confluence of forces that are set to influence the direction taken by these institutions in the foreseeable future. Among these influences are digitalisation, globalisation, platformisation and continuing digital innovations, all affecting the content, delivery, resourcing and packaging of academic knowledge.

As with other contemporary industries, information and its related processes are key drivers of these influences. In most institutions, including HEIs, information processing is generally associated with information technology (IT) professionals and linked to the appropriation of mostly technical skills sets. While technical knowledge is important for understanding digital innovations, more important is the expertise in promoting an institutional information culture where there is an appreciation for how information is collected, disseminated, stored, processed etc., in other words, information resource management.

This is an area which is more the province of information professionals such as librarians. The profession of the HEI librarian, however, is itself being disrupted by technological innovations and digitalisation. This means that new roles are evolving, which are intrinsic to the ongoing influences affecting the sector.

In developing country contexts, lack of, or insufficient access to, key technological infrastructure has consistently been identified as a barrier to the performance of information-related functions in the HEI sector. Access to high capacity Internet connectivity is key to providing the infrastructural platforms to support these initiatives and Research and Education Network (RENs), whose development has been supported by network connectivity projects such as AfricaConnect, are seen as key underlying enablers. At the national level (NRENs), they can offer HEIs a range of services underpinned by digital infrastructure. The existence of this digital infrastructure is meant to support innovation, collaboration and knowledge sharing between HEIs that are connected and to boost a region's education/research capability and support initiatives such as Open Science, Open Innovation and Open Data, i.e. information-rich platforms that help build information resource capability institutionally.

Clearly then, a focus on the direction and development of the evolving role of African HEI librarians, identifying the institutional factors that either constrain or enable this evolving role and an understanding of how the capabilities of NREN services could be leveraged in these efforts becomes a key research agenda. To progress such an agenda a pilot survey involving the West and Central African Research and Education Network (WACREN) and the University of Sheffield Information School was launched.

Pilot Survey Aims and Objectives

The aim of the pilot survey was to identify key institutional enablers and hindrances in the current support for the evolving role of librarians in the West and Central African higher education community and to understand their underlying NREN service needs.

The objectives of the survey were to:

1. Understand the evolving role of the librarian in contemporary higher education settings, especially vis-à-vis digital resources.

2. Understand how institutions within the higher education sector support or constrain the roles of librarians, especially where these are concerned with management of digital resources.

3. Elicit the NREN service requirements that librarians need to support their roles

4. Gather demographic information that would be useful in categorizing the librarian communities of practice so as to understand theevolving field better.

Survey Development and Deployment

Preliminary work on initial drafts of the survey were accomplished through the following initiatives: (a) distribution of a draft "Skeleton Survey" on the "Discussion About Libraries in WACREN" mailing list in February (b) incorporation of initial feedback and further comments taken at the Association of University Librarians of Nigerian Universities (AUNLU) workshop on 5-8th March 2017 in Abuja, Nigeria (c) launch of a draft version of the survey at the WACREN Librarian's Workshop on 27-28th March 2017 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire and (d) finalisation of the resulting changes with the help of WACREN, the Ivorian Research and Education Network (RITER) and AULNU and a literature survey on the topic area undertaken at the University of Sheffield Information School.

The final pilot survey questionnaire contains 66 questions split into 6 sections. Sections A to D relate respectively to questions about the management, operational, specialist subject and technical library functions of an HEI. Section E asks questions about the sufficiency of the librarian's digital skills sets and the evolving roles of the library and librarian while section F captures sample demographics. The pilot survey was launched using the existing mailing list (the WACREN librarian community discussion list) that serves a subsection of the higher education librarian communities in the West and Central African higher education community and is hosted by WACREN serving a region of 22 West and Central African countries. There are about 95 registered users of this list, to which a link to an online version of the survey, also hosted by WACREN, was made available. Any other potential respondents were canvassed by WACREN and its collaborating NREN organisations through their mailing lists.

The data were captured automatically by the online survey and stored on WACREN's servers. 100 responses were received, from which complete responses totalled 64. Analysis of the data was done using Microsoft Excel.

Findings and Discussion

The completed version of this paper will provide an in-depth analysis and discussion of the pilot survey findings. Since it was a pilot study, two aspects will be analysed: (1) what the findings reveal about the underlying research objectives/aim and (2) what the findings reveal about the way in which the sample respondents reacted to questions, e.g., what they chose to disclose or not disclose. All questions were based on categorical variables, and therefore all analyses are either descriptive or based on simple bivariate correlations. All free text questions were analysed using simple thematic analyses.

Some interesting findings that will be explored in the final paper include:

1. The gender and age composition of the sample and its relationship to the prevailing views held about the role of the library (most claimed it was a service provider and not an innovator)

2. The tendency of the sample to frame the "evolving role of the library" in terms of technology-enabled traditional activities and not see the potential for innovation/novelty

3. The sometimes conflicting responses concerning infrastructural support and technological capability (claims of adequate technological support against claims of resource-poverty)

4. An apparent difference between the responses between Francophone-based participants vs. Anglophone-based participants

5. The extent to which the library function can control information architectural issues related to information resource management

6. A broad appreciation of how HEI resources such as budgets and training are apportioned

7. A broad appreciation of how digital techniques are supported and catered for in HEI libraries

8. A broad understanding of how librarians identify their roles in the evolving HEI landscape

These findings will be discussed in the light of the literature researched around these topics. Finally, recommendations for the launch of a wider-ranging survey addressing the full WACREN HEI librarian community and beyond will be proposed and links made as to how this can progress HEI policy in these regions.

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