

LIBRARY REFORMS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CRITICAL ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

This paper critically examined the challenges surrounding library reforms in the 21st century and proposes strategic solutions to address these issues. It traces the direction of library development, analyzes the evolving role of libraries in the digital age, identifies key barriers hindering reform efforts, and outlines a comprehensive framework for revitalizing libraries to meet the needs of diverse user populations. By dissecting the historical context, critical issues such as funding constraints were considered, technological transformations, and changing user expectations, this paper offers insights into the complex dynamics shaping the future of libraries and provides actionable recommendations for sustainable reform initiatives such as technology should be invested on, other sources of founding should be considered, user engagement should be enhancing among others.

Keywords: Library reforms, 21st century, Policies, Technology, Challenges, Solutions.

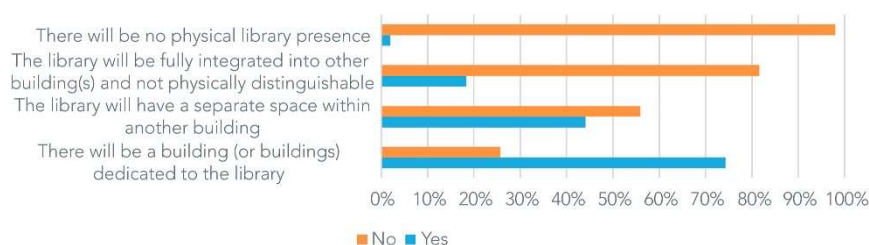
Introduction

Libraries have long been regarded as essential institutions in society, serving as repositories of knowledge, centers for learning, and hubs for community engagement. Libraries varies from each other such as special library, academic library, school library and law library among others depending on the parent institution that established them. These libraries are as well saddled with different responsibilities which has been redefined due to advances in technology (Devan, 2020). To this American Library Association (2022) libraries all geared tailored towards making resources and services available and accessible to users. To this integration of accessibility principles has become integral to the standard discourse surrounding libraries as they establish digital platforms and online resources as well as assisting the parent establishment in fulfilling her objectives. Hence, the focus of this work - academic libraries. For instant, within higher education institutions, academic libraries serve a crucial function by bolstering teaching, learning, and research endeavors (Ullah & Usama, 2023). There is no gainsaying that the 21st century has witnessed a concerted effort to reform and modernize academic libraries in Nigeria (Abubakar, 2011) driven by the need to enhance their effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance in the digital age (Thiruppathi, 2024). In recent time, academic libraries have undergone significant transformations in response to evolving educational paradigms, technological advancements, and changing user expectations.

Academic libraries as any other libraries have long been regarded as essential institutions in society, serving as repositories of knowledge, centers for learning, and hubs for community engagement. However, in the 21st century, libraries face unprecedented challenges as they navigate the complexities of the digital age. Rapid technological advancements, shifting user demographics, and evolving societal expectations are reshaping the landscape of libraries, necessitating strategic reforms to ensure their continued relevance and effectiveness. This paper explores the critical issues facing library reforms in the 21st century and presents a roadmap for addressing these challenges and charting a course for sustainable reform.

Historical Context: The beginning of the 21st century marked a period of transition for academic libraries in Nigeria. With the rapid proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs), libraries faced mounting pressure to adapt to the changing information landscape. The digital revolution revolutionized the way information was accessed, disseminated, and preserved, posing both challenges and opportunities for academic libraries. In response, stakeholders within the Nigerian higher education sector began to prioritize library reform as a means of addressing these challenges and harnessing the potential of ICTs to enhance library services.

The role of libraries has evolved significantly in the 21st century, driven by technological advancements and changing user behaviors. Traditionally, libraries served as repositories of print materials, offering access to books, journals, and other physical resources (Ebbitts, 2015). However, with the advent of the internet and digital technologies, libraries have expanded their services (Salubi, 2023 citing Ahmed & Al-Reyae; Düren, 2013) to include access to digital resources, online databases, and multimedia content. The concept and physical layout of libraries have been substantially influenced by the swift technological progress and evolving user perspectives on information access and utilization in recent decades (Ahmed and Al-Reyae, 2017). Libraries have now increasingly become community hubs, offering a wide range of programs and services beyond traditional library functions, such as literacy programs, maker spaces, and cultural events. This evolution reflects the changing needs and expectations of users in an increasingly digital and interconnected world. The proliferation of information resources is experiencing unprecedented growth (Roetzel, 2019). Ahmed and Al-Reyae (2017) emphasize that libraries have significantly invested in electronic resources like journal databases and e-books to meet the unique requirements of users. These investments underscore libraries' dedication to adapting to the ever-changing landscape of information provision. However, there are critical issues facing libraries with respect to reforms.



Library in physical spaces (Adapted from Pinfield et al., 2017).

Critical Issues Facing Library Reforms:

Considering the benefits of libraries in enhancing development and the immense contributions to national development, there are critical issues/hindrances facing library reforms in Nigeria. These include but not limited to:

1. **Funding Constraints:** One of the primary challenges facing library reforms especially academic libraries in Nigeria was funding constraints which includes lack of adequate infrastructure and resources to support modern library services. Libraries have faced enduring budgetary constraints making libraries to be ill-equipped to handle the influx of digital resources and lacked the necessary technology infrastructure to provide seamless access to electronic databases, exacerbated the adoption of e-books and the growing reliance on digital infrastructure, which amplifies technology expenses (Rosen, 2020). The economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic has also worsened the financial difficulties experienced by libraries and librarians. Libraries must prioritize their spending and evaluate whether the allocated resources will genuinely benefit their

user patrons (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Many libraries operate on limited budgets, which restrict their ability to invest in new technologies, expand collections, and enhance services. In an era of fiscal austerity and competing priorities, libraries must find innovative ways to secure funding and maximize the impact of limited resources. Additionally, there was a need to update library policies, practices, and workflows to align with emerging trends in information management and scholarly communication.

2. **Technological Transformations:** Technological advancements present both opportunities and challenges for libraries. While digital technologies have the potential to enhance access to information and improve user experiences, they also require significant investments in infrastructure, staff training, and digital content (Rosen, 2020). Libraries must adapt to these technological transformations to remain relevant and effective in meeting the needs of digital-native users.
3. **Changing User Expectations:** As society becomes increasingly digital-centric, users' expectations of libraries are evolving. Today's users expect seamless access to information and services across multiple platforms and devices, personalized recommendations based on their interests and preferences, and interactive and engaging programming that goes beyond traditional library offerings. Libraries must align their services and resources with these changing user expectations to remain relevant and attract new users.
4. **Equity and Access:** Ensuring equity and access to library services and resources is another critical issue facing library reforms in the 21st century. In an era of growing economic inequality and digital divide, libraries play a vital role in narrowing the divide by offering free and open access to information and technology for all members of society, irrespective of their socio-economic status or background. Libraries have served as effective agents in diminishing the tangible digital divide, addressing the challenge faced by many individuals in accessing the Internet and digital resources. However, achieving equity and access requires proactive efforts to address barriers such as physical accessibility, language barriers, and digital literacy gaps.
5. **Policy and Advocacy:** Library as a sector is a composite of intellectuals that helps in shaping the needed manpower for national development, hence to be efficient in this call of national development and reforms in the 21st century, there is need for the appropriated policy to be in place. As contained in the statement “Nigerian Library Association can no longer take the gross abuse of the laws of the land as it concerns the sector” (Omokaro, 2024). Policy and advocacy are essential components of successful library reforms in the 21st century. In developed countries The National Information Standards Organization (NISO) develops technical standards aimed at enhancing library operations (NISO, 2005). Library policies could involve: social policies on technology use, policies on acquisition, maintainace, staffing among others. Many of those standards affect technology Since libraries is a special sector saddled with the nation responsibility which is targeted towards the nations' information management and acquisition of adequate tools needed for such achievement, it is imperative to advocate for policies and legislation that support their mission and ensure adequate funding and resources for library services. Furthermore, libraries must actively engage with policymakers, stakeholders, and the community to raise awareness of the value and importance of libraries and advocate for policies that promote equity, access, and innovation.

Way Forward

Addressing these critical issues in the 21st century requires a multifaceted approach that combines strategic planning, collaboration, and innovation even as various initiatives were

launched to reform academic libraries across Nigeria. The following are key recommendations for charting a way forward:

1. **Diversifying Funding Sources:** Libraries should explore alternative funding sources such as grants, partnerships, and donor contributions to supplement traditional sources of funding and support innovative initiatives.
2. **Investing in Technology:** Strategic investments in technology infrastructure, digital resources, and staff training are essential for equipping libraries to meet the evolving needs of users and remain competitive in the digital age. The government as a matter of importance and priority must invest in infrastructure development.
3. **Enhancing User Engagement:** Libraries should actively engage with users to understand their needs, preferences, and challenges and tailor their services and programs accordingly. User-centered design principles should guide decision-making processes to ensure that libraries remain responsive to user feedback and evolving trends.
4. **Promoting Collaboration:** Collaboration among libraries, government agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations is essential for maximizing resources, sharing best practices, and addressing common challenges. By fostering partnerships and collaboration, libraries can leverage collective expertise and resources to achieve greater impact and sustainability.
5. **Advocating for Policy Change:** Libraries must advocate for policies and legislation that support their mission and ensure adequate funding and resources for library services. Furthermore, libraries must actively engage with policymakers, stakeholders, and the community to raise awareness of the value and importance of libraries and advocate for policies that promote equity, access, and innovation.

Conclusion

The 21st century Library reforms in the 21st century is essential for ensuring that libraries remain vibrant and relevant institutions in the digital age. By addressing critical issues such as funding constraints, technological transformations, changing user expectations, equity and access, and policy and advocacy, libraries can position themselves as dynamic hubs of knowledge, innovation, and community engagement. The way forward requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders to invest in the future of libraries while building on past successes and embracing emerging trends and ensure that they continue to fulfill their mission of serving the needs of diverse user populations in the 21st century and beyond to enables Nigerian academic libraries continuing in playing her pivotal role in supporting teaching, learning, and research in the digital age

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