

ACADEMIC STATUS FOR LIBRARIANS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES: MYTH OR REALITY?

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Abstract:

The paper reviews the problem of academic status for University Librarians with emphasis on the situation in Nigeria. Three major problems militating against the non-recognition of librarians as academics in Nigeria are highlighted. These are lack of time for research and publication, the unwillingness on the part of the university authorities to recognise librarians as academic, and the fear of the 'publish or perish syndrome' as academic requirement by librarians. The paper concludes that academic status for librarians in Nigerian Universities is gaining grounds.

INTRODUCTION

The office of the Librarian is an old one; as old as the academic institution. But it was only at the end of the 19th century that the part-time position of the librarian usually held by faculty member (professor) turned into a fully time administrative position.¹ The argument whether librarians are academic or not in status is an old issue which is yet to be resolved in most countries, especially in a developing country like Nigeria. Many writers such as Davey², Watson³ and Rayman⁴ in the developed world have expressed their views on the implications of academic status for librarians. In Europe and America alone there were as many as 60 surveys between 1971-1984 on this issue.⁵ Little attention has been paid to the discussion of academic status for librarians in Africa compared to the developed countries.⁶

There are apparent conflicts today over the professional, administrative and academic functions of the librarian. The traditional role of the librarian

as a passive custodian of books is fast changing. The librarian today needs to be part of the decision making body; especially when the library and its functions are being discussed. To further clarify the important role of the librarian, the Special Libraries Association of the United States of America in 1987 issued a report on the value of the information professional.⁷ Galloway⁸ and Salisu⁹ have given an overview of the academic status of librarians in the United States of America and Nigeria respectively. A more recent survey on the issue was carried out in Nigeria by Unomah.⁵ This paper attempts an overview of the present situation in Nigeria highlighting areas of success.

WHO IS AN ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN?

While it is not easy to define an academic librarian a description will suffice. It might be instructive first to look at why the lecturer is academic. The academic nature of the lecturer is a reflection of his functions in the university; namely: teaching, research, publication, consultancy activities, attendance at conferences, seminars and work-

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shops. He is fully integrated into the academic programme of the university. To the lecturer enhancement on the job depends to a large extent on how efficiently he/she performs in the above activities. The amended law establishing Obafemi Awolowo University (University of Ife) defines academic staff as Vice Chancellor, Professors, Readers, Senior Lecturers, Lecturers, Assistant Lecturers, the Librarian, and such other persons in the employment of the university engaged in teaching or research therein.¹⁰

The problems of the librarian as an academic is compounded because of the nature of his duties. According to Holley¹¹ "the problem of a rigorous definition of academic librarianship is reflected in the fact that librarians see themselves in various roles: as faculty engaged in teaching and research, as helping professionals with clients to serve, or as managers with a business to run." The academic librarian therefore, is one who, in addition to performing his traditional professional role of acquisition and maintenance of balanced collection, making the collection available to users, rendering services to users as well as administering the library, also takes part in active research, publication, seminars and conferences. He also performs some teaching functions which could be in the form of formal classroom teaching or the library's user education programme. It is not easy to fulfil these different roles efficiently and effectively.

In addition to the above description of the academic librarian it is worthy of note that librarianship in Nigeria is fast becoming a postgraduate affair in contrast to what obtained in the past.¹² This is in response to the need for higher academic background for librarians as well as evidence of the academic inclination of librarians. For instance, at the University of Ibadan emphasis is now being placed on the possession of subject background for admission into Master of Library Studies programme. In some university libraries, especially those that are science and technology oriented, entry into the profession is

through the possession of first degree plus a professional qualification in librarianship. Some librarians have higher academic degrees in subject areas other than librarianship while others are working on their Ph.D. Librarians with the Ph.D degree can be found in the universities of Anambra State, Bendel State, Ibadan, Jos, Maiduguri, Nsukka and Zaria. However, it is not expected that all librarians would possess the Ph.D degree. This is corroborated by the statement of the Association of College and Research Libraries Draft Committee that "the library field might be compared with such fields as arts, music and engineering, where the doctorate, although offered is rarity, years of professional and subject field training should be the base, rather than the degree, plus some weight in varied situation."¹³

THE NIGERIAN SCENE

In Nigeria there is no consensus yet among universities as regards the status of the librarians (all professional practising librarians, not just the University Librarian). The University Librarian, by virtue of the position as a Principal Officer, and a member of the Senate is already Academic in status. Are all practising librarians academic? This thorny issue has been addressed by several writers. Nwafor,¹⁴ Ekpenyong,¹⁵ Oluwkuyide,¹⁶ Osundina,¹⁷ Onyechi,¹⁸ Unomah,⁵ Awaritefe¹⁹ share the view that no consensus has existed on the status of librarians in Nigeria over the past years. While some hold academic status others are classified as administrative, depending on the universities and their councils. However, this view is changing for the better. Most (if not all) first generation and many of the second and third generation universities now accord academic status to their librarians with privileges similar to those enjoyed by their lecturer counterparts. This is the case in universities like Anambra State University of Science and Technology, Ahmadu Bello University (Zaria), Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University (Bauchi), Universities of Benin, Jos, Lagos, Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife. Before 1975

Academic status

librarians in the Universities of Benin, Ibadan, Ife and Lagos were to a large extent regarded as academic although they were still being denied rights like research leave and sabbatical leave.²⁰

In practical terms the struggle for academic status for librarians in the universities started with the report of the Udoji review panel in 1975. The Udoji Salary Review Commission was set up to review salaries of university staff in Nigeria. The outcome was that the professional librarians were down graded by one level (excluding University Librarians) compared to their lecturer counterparts or faculty members. This was an indication of the non-academic status accorded the librarians. With the Udoji report government refused to recognise librarians as academic.

There is growing evidence that librarians are becoming more aware of the need to attain academic status. In a survey carried out by Ampitan²¹ on 5 Nigerian universities on the desirability or otherwise of academic status to librarians working in university libraries, 74% of the respondents favoured academic status while 26% were against. In a more recent survey carried out by Unomah,⁵ using 121 librarians from Universities and Polytechnics, 2.49% of them indicated they were still administrators, 69.42% said they had partial (not full) academic status, while only 28.09% felt they had full academic status. Focusing on 25 university library chief executives 56% indicated they had full academic status while 44% were yet to be so recognized.

At the Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, Bauchi (ATBU), where librarians have attained full academic status and even faculty status as their lecturer counterparts, the librarians teach Senate approved credit-earning course in the Use of Library Resources tagged GNS 201, thereby performing their teaching role as academics. The staff also enjoy university sponsorship to present papers at Seminars, Workshops and Conferences. They are expected to engage in research and publish articles in refereed journals in order to ad-

vance on the job. They are entitled to 26 days research leave every year subject to proven evidence of an on-going research, as well as sabbatical leave. The librarians are also active members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The above notwithstanding, the librarians have to carry out the highly specialized functions of selection, acquisition, organization, storage, retrieval and dissemination of information. This entails hard work and dedication on the part of the librarian.

Academic status for librarians implies the additional function of teaching, researching and publishing in addition to their normal routine duties. To effectively carry out these functions librarians should possess academic background as well as professional qualifications and experience. These are reflected in the requirements for promotion at the Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University (ATBU) in its publication '*Academic Staff Guideline for Promotion 1990*'. The relevant section is reproduced below:

Graduate Assistant/Assistant Librarian to Assistant Lecturer/Assistant Research Fellow/ Librarian II

With MSc/MLS (or 3 years waiting period)

Assistant Lecturer/Librarian II to Lecturer II/ Research Fellow/Librarian I

With PhD Degree - No waiting period

With MSc/MLS

- 3 years waiting period
- 1 conference paper at least

Librarians - 3 years of bibliographical experience

Lecturer I/Librarian I to Lecturer I/Research Fellow I/Senior Librarian

With PhD

- 3 years waiting period
- 1 refereed journal publication

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- 1 conference paper

Librarian

- 2 refereed journal publications
- 3 years waiting

Lecturer I/Senior Librarian to Senior Lecturer/ Senior Research Fellow/Principal Librarian

With PhD

- 3 years waiting period
- 6 refereed journal publications
- 3 conference paper (in addition to administrative ability and community service)

Senior Lecturer/Principal Librarian to Reader/ Principal Research Fellow/Deputy University Librarian

With PhD

- 3 years waiting period
- 10 refereed journal publications
- 5 conference paper
- good academic leadership
- administrative ability
- community service
- subject to external assessment

Librarians

- PhD Optional
- 3 years waiting
- 8 publications
- subject to external assessment
- evidence of considerable administrative experience

Promotion to Professor/Research Professor/ University Librarian

In addition to substantial research work, academic, administrative responsibility and community service:

- PhD
- 15 quality refereed journal papers
- 7 conference paper

- subject to external assessment

Librarians

- 3 years waiting
- 10 refereed publications
- subject to external assessment
- evidence of considerable administrative experience.....

There is a "Library Academic Board", just as there are other Boards of Studies in this institution which is an indication of the academic status accorded librarians in the institution.

The example above is close to the ideal, if not the ideal conditions that would enable librarians in Nigerian university libraries acquire full academic status. It would seem that the possession of academic subject knowledge and professional knowledge, coupled with productive participation in the educational programmes of institutions should be the criteria for according academic status to librarians.²² The emphasis here is on "productive participation" in the educational programme of the university.

PROBLEMS

As indicated earlier there are problems militating against full attainment of academic status for librarians in Nigerian universities. This paper identifies three main obstacles and suggests solutions.

Lack of Time

Librarians complain of the unfairness in being assessed on the same parameters of research and scholarly publications as their lecturer counterparts. The argument is that the lecturer has more time for research and private study than the librarian. While the librarian puts in eight busy hours a day his lecturer counterpart puts in on the average three-five hours of lectures a day. The lecturer therefore has extra hours for marking of scripts, and pursuing research. The rigidity of the librarian's work schedule makes it difficult to incorporate study and research. It has been argued that "even after adding the hours needed

for preparation of lecture notes and the correction of scripts, it is found that the lecturer's workload in no way compares with the tight schedule of the librarian."²³ Another finding seems to corroborate the claim that the librarian has little time for research.²⁴ However, a study carried out on reading interests of librarians at the University of Ibadan, suggests otherwise.²⁵ It is therefore necessary to investigate this issue further.

If librarians in the university system must remain academics in the face of seemingly lack of time, it might be necessary to consider the following remedial measures:

- i. to allocate some time (e.g. two hours daily) for research and professional improvement;
- ii. to employ adequate number of librarians in order to reduce the work load on each librarian;
- iii. librarians to be required to publish less number of journal articles compared to their lecturer counterparts for promotion purposes. This is in operation at the ATBU as reflected in the guidelines already referred to;
- iv. librarians to be entitled to research leave annually to enable them effectively carry out their research projects.

Recognition

Another problem is the unwillingness of a university authority to recognise librarians as academic. This problem may arise because of one or more of the following:

- i. Poor staffing of the library. This may be the case where the library is poorly staffed in terms of qualified librarians. It may also arise in situations where librarians have little or no subject background and find it difficult to contribute bibliographically and through discussions to the educational programme of the university. The academic community expects the librarian to engage in confident and meaningful discussions on matters af-

fecting the university.

- ii. Lack of recognition may be due to poor image of the librarian and librarianship. The public image of the librarian is enhanced if he is a specialist in his field and not a generalist. The librarian should have some subject background plus professional training.
- iii. It could also arise from mere reluctance on the part of the university authority to modify or change its old conception of the librarian as a custodian of books and a non-academic/administrative staff.

Lack of Will

A third problem is the unwillingness of librarians themselves to be academic. Some librarians dread the "publish or perish" syndrome in Nigerian universities and therefore content themselves with the administrative/non-academic status. The librarian cannot run away from the fact that he is living in an academic community in which one of the accepted norms is the ability to publish. The Librarian should brace himself up and show more interest in publishing. He should be prolific to disprove the erroneous belief that publishing is solely for the faculty. However, the editorial process, especially the reviewing of articles in Nigeria, should be fair enough to encourage emerging librarians to contribute to the literature in librarianship.

The writer is of the view that the time has come for librarians in Nigerian universities to assume more academic roles in order to fully integrate themselves into the academic programmes of the universities they belong to and thereby contribute towards achieving the educational objectives of those institutions.

CONCLUSION

The main function of the university library apart from the provision of excellent collections for teaching, research, studying and consultancy, is to integrate the library with the academic pro-

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gramme of the university. To effectively carry out the above functions librarians are required to possess academic background, professional qualifications and experience. Further more they are increasingly being expected to undertake research and contribute to the rapid development of the profession just as the nutritionist, agriculturist or the chemist will undertake research in his respective discipline. In pursuance of this objective the librarian requires some of the facilities which create an enabling environment for his academic counterpart to conduct research in addition to his teaching function. The good sign is that librarians are gradually being accorded academic status in many Nigerian Universities. The hope is that this would be the norm in the future.

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