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IMPERATIVES OF VIRTUAL LIBRARY SERVICES ON THE QUALITY OF TEACHING, LEARNING AND RESEARCH FOR STUDENTS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT
The paper discusses the role of virtual library services could play in improving the quality of teaching, learning and research for Nigerian university students. The problems identified as the bane of virtual library service in Nigerian universities include, low level of information literacy on the students' part, low level of proficiency for digitally-based information service delivery on the part of library staff, irregular supply of electric power and the reluctance on the part of the students to shed off their preference for print based resources and switch service demands on libraries to digitally-held resources, a situation attributable in part to their low level of information literacy. Recommendations made to improve on the situation include, an 'aggressive' information literacy action plan in Nigerian universities for the students and library staff, improvement in power supply to libraries as a first line priority and effective collaboration with model virtual library services in other countries of the world as part of a consortium.

Key words: Virtual Library Services; Students; Quality of Teaching; Learning; Research; Nigerian universities.

INTRODUCTION
It will be stating the obvious that the library is the bedrock of the academic activities of teaching, learning and research. The quality and outcome of all teaching and learning activities are predicated on the quality of information resources available and effectively utilized by both the teacher and the student. Information resource availability and utilization is very crucial to any level of academic pursuit. Without adequate resource base, not much could be achieved within the educational system. It is an established fact that apart from quality of human resources, another factor that contributes immensely to the quality of education at any level is the quality, quantity and variety of
For a long while, books and journals were the only means of information provision for learning and research. Today, the forces of change combined with necessity have altered that stereotype. Information resources appear in different formats and through several channels. Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) have opened up new vista of opportunities for information generation, storage and transfer in the increasingly globalized world. These technologies have impacted heavily on the way we live and work as well as how we learn. Ojedokun (2007), Aina (2004) and Kibirige (1996) all outlined the potentials of ICT in providing the platform for generating, processing, storing and utilizing electronic information resources (EIR)

Research particularly, is one of the benchmark practices in academics needed to extend existing knowledge in all fields, to solve given problems at hand and to add further clarity to what is already known. Adeyemo (2006) opines that research is a systematic and organized way to find answers to questions, while Aina (2002) sees it as the ability of enquiring into a problem involving a systematic way of enquiry. To underscore the importance of research in academics, undergraduates are required to carry out a research project in their final year and to submit a bound project report as part of the fulfillment of the requirements for the award of bachelor's degree, besides other times when they are required to research for different purposes such as writing of term papers, seminar presentations, preparation of notes. As a prerequisite for successful research, the university student must rely on the age-long scholarly practice of reliance on existing knowledge, as contained in the literature, as the basis for inquest into the unknown.

The research process is cyclical. It starts like a curiosity in the mind of the researcher. This is the problem identification phase of the research. Here the research topic is chosen and relevant questions are raised. The next step is the review and evaluation of relevant literature. Here the researcher identifies, abstracts, synthesizes and appraises previous research works for the purpose of clarifying, understanding and finding a solution to the problem under investigation. The goals of literature review are three fold. They are:

- To place the current research project into a scientific perspective,
- To avoid duplication of effort, and
To avoid or solve problems others have encountered in their research (Adeyemo, 2006:2).

The foregoing view reveals the importance of citing previous works in a research. In Nwalo's (2006) view, literature citation is the hallmark of scholarship. Among other benefits, literature review exposes a researcher to what works have been done in relation to the present research, methodologies adopted, findings and knowledge gaps that need to be filled. A researcher gets a sense of direction through literature review. Hence, this is popularly referred to as standing on the shoulders of giants.

As important as literature citation is in a research, it is equally important and expected that the researcher acknowledges all documents and other sources consulted in the research process as a core obligation and in conformity with best practices in academics. Failure to acknowledge such consulted sources is according to Nwalo's (2006) further view, tantamount to intellectual dishonesty. This kind of malpractice is popularly referred to as plagiarism and is punishable.

The importance of the library in linking the researcher to different information sources for literature search, analysis and citation cannot be overstated. The library provides the researcher not only with the resources (materials) but also the right environment conducive for research coupled with professional assistance from the librarians when needed. The concept of virtual libraries have added further dimensions to this academic comfort offered by libraries to students, teachers, researchers and other library users. The utilization of Electronic Information Resources, especially virtual library resources, has become widely accepted in the academia as veritable source of information for supporting the teaching/learning process and research. The impact of the utilization of virtual libraries on Nigerian university students is therefore the focus of this article.

OPERATIONAL MODES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
But for events within the past ten years, a discussion of the operational modes of university libraries in Nigeria would have been unnecessary. This is because at that time almost all university libraries in Nigeria operated completely in the manual mode. There are basically three operational modes for all types of libraries, including university libraries, which are, completely manual, combination of manual and

In a completely manual library, all library routines and services are handled by human beings. The routines in the manual mode rely heavily on paper work and human activities as a rigid framework. In the electronic/digital mode, computers are used in the rendering of library services. The history of computer use in university library activities in Nigeria range from skeletal application to routine administrative and circulation tasks to complete automation of all library routine tasks, and very recently to the full digitization of organized information resources provision in a networked environment, otherwise referred to as virtual library service. The virtual library concept has, therefore, become the latest phenomenon in service delivery to users of Nigerian university libraries. This service is at present rendered alongside the manual print-based library service in all the libraries.

THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY CONCEPT
What is a virtual library? There are as many definitions as there are authors for the concept of virtual library. One definition readily available is that a virtual library is a library without walls, while another is that, it is a worldwide collection of online books, journals and articles available on the Internet. Schrock (2010) states that to some, virtual libraries represent the collection of digitized primary sources, while to others, it is the portal that allows password access to the subscription databases held at their local, public, school, or university library, but that to her, a virtual library is a group of "catalogued" web sites that extend the resources of a school or public library beyond its four walls.

Virtual libraries are multiple online resources devoted to the needs of their specific learning communities. From a home page, users' access search engines, databases, reference, and general library and school information (Valenza, Dec. 2005/Jan., 2006). What is obvious is that virtual libraries and their services are offered within the framework of a completely digital library environment. In a digital library, all services are computerized. The utilization of computers and related techniques, alongside the peripherals, pave way for the provision of the right information to the right reader at the right time in a right form and in a right personal way. The concept of virtual libraries is a step beyond the possibilities offered by automation, complete digitization and networking as libraries can now exist in a "paperless" environment, where users can approach the system, retrieve the documents they intend to use, read
them on the system or "borrow" by downloading free documents into their system, without touching a physical paper. In essence, a complete library exists only in the electronic format, yet it has all the attributes of a paper based manual library.

With the advances made in information technology and the popularity of the Internet, more and more information resources which were once available only in books and journals, are now widely available on the network. Libraries are no longer bound within their four walls. Not only the library has the option to access a wide range of databases, but also the alternative to digitize their resources and mount them on the network to provide broader access to its collection. Several synonyms have emerged for the virtual library concept and they include; Library Without Walls, Networked Library, Electronic Library and Digital Library.

The virtual library appears to remove many of the constraints associated with the paper library, such as the effective limitation to local collections (information resources), the tendency for desired materials to be unavailable, delays in service delivery and limited opening hours. With these constraints removed or moderated, users stand a better chance of effective and faster access to the information required. One imperative however, is that in the virtual library environment, all who visit the library must adapt to new search techniques, different sort of catalogues and a completely new method of learning.

Web search techniques are advancing, and various search engines help users to find valuable information from the huge information resources distributed on the internet. The search engines can be considered as a retrieval mechanism for a virtual library. However, various types of digital libraries have been developed and come into practical use. Some libraries provide users with information services such as searching books stored in real libraries through www browsers. Others provide users with text file data and document images scanned from real books (Hakozaki et.al., 1999).

A virtual library according to Brooks Kirkland (2009) offers a wide array of collections such as subscription databases ranging from online encyclopedias to indexes of peer reviewed journals. There is said to be a big shift happening in how access are built to web sources since they can now become part of the virtual learning environment.
IMPACT OF THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY ON TEACHING, LEARNING AND RESEARCH

The primary role of the virtual library is to provide the users with resources to support the teaching, learning and research process in conjunction with teachers or lecturers who provide suggestions on areas of interest based on the curriculum. The virtual librarian relies on the many categorized, annotated, subject specific and general virtual libraries on the web as platform to collate a target-specific virtual collection. With virtual library, the quality of academic library collections will be bolstered, staff and students will be able to access databases for teaching and research. Also, accessibility to recent publications will be enhanced (Fabunmi, 2009).

Schrock (2010) suggests that the virtual librarian or media specialist can help the students and teachers in his or her school by creating a virtual library that complements the print collection, adheres to state and local curriculum frameworks and is critically evaluated for authority and authenticity, while Fabunmi (2009) cited Okebukola (2002) as holding that virtual libraries would improve the quality of teaching and research in higher institutions through the provision of current e-books, e-journals and other library resources. This will enhance scholarship, research and lifelong learning through the establishment of permanent access to shared virtual collections; provide guidance to academic libraries on ways of applying appropriate technologies for production of virtual library resources and to advance the use and usability of globally distributed network of library resources. This foregoing view suggests that virtual libraries may exist alongside a print-based manual library system thus playing a complimentary role to each other in meeting the information needs of their users.

In Fagan’s (2009) view, a virtual library should make sure that its electronic resources are easily searchable and are customized in the most effective way possible. For any online collection larger than a few titles, some technical features should include the following:

1. The ability to Meta-search the collection or database.
2. Unique durable URLs for entry pages and for specific subject areas and sources.
3. HTML code for placing a search box to the resource anywhere on a website.
4. Integration with link resolver software
5. Easy links for users to share results with others (e-mail, save,

This is what is obtainable at present in most Nigerian universities through the efforts of the National Universities Commission (NUC), which created a National Virtual Library for Nigerian universities. The URL for the NUC Virtual Library is www.nigeranvirtuallibrary.com/. The goal of the virtual library project is to ensure that users of Nigerian university libraries have the highest and latest publications in their fields to facilitate teaching, research and learning. The supporting philosophy behind this project is that "wisdom enriched by knowledge liberates the mind to rise to its full potential." The National Virtual Library project is an online digital library presently hosted and managed by the National Universities Commission (NUC), designed with the support and funding from the Education Trust Fund (ETF), UNESCO and the Japanese government. The fields covered, include the Humanities/Arts, Medical/Health Sciences, Pure Sciences, Social Sciences, Technology, Agriculture/Veterinary Medicine, Education, Business/Management Studies, Engineering, Law etc.

To access the resources of the NUC Virtual Library, a new user requires valid username and password. New users can obtain valid username and password from their university's librarian. Existing or returning users log in to the site at the top-left corner of the home page or on the login page to gain access to the resources of the library.

With the availability of the Nigerian Virtual Library project, students in Nigerian universities stand the chance of conducting in-depth literature review in the process of conducting their research. Besides the depth of literature coverage, users are offered speedy access to these resources at the touch of a computer button. Literature citation in researches is therefore made more elaborate and faster coupled with the assurance of authenticity.

PROBLEMS OF VIRTUAL LIBRARY SERVICE
The notion of virtual library service in universities in Nigeria is a recent development. Before the efforts of the NUC, no Nigerian university has embarked on such a project alone. In fact, most of the university libraries were operating in a completely manual mode. The novel idea of a national virtual library service by the NUC therefore came off as a sort of 'system shock' to the manual university library systems. As is the
case with everything that is new, some challenges have arisen with the introduction of virtual library service in Nigerian universities.

The virtual library, being a new trend is saddled with a myriad of problems, one of which is the fact that connect time on the web sometimes can be very slow and frustrating. This is often the case in Africa, where telecommunication infrastructure is poor and capacity (bandwidth) is inadequate on telephone lines. Equally problematic is the fact that most scholarly electronic materials, especially journals are not free but are accessed only on subscription. Are Nigerian university libraries ready for this?

Schaffer (2001) suggests that it is more expensive to store and manage digital collections than traditional print because of the dynamic nature of computer equipment, hardware and format platforms that most often require constant upgrading. Can the perennially poorly funded Nigerian university libraries afford this luxury? Aina (2003) advises university libraries in Nigeria to form consortia in order to overcome this financial challenge. This in itself is a big challenge because of the fact that the traditional role of the library has been in the conservation of printed materials. Smith (1999) argues that digitization is not a solution to preservation. Digital resources are better for accessibility to information but very weak when assigned the traditional library responsibility of preservation. It is therefore a serious doubt that university libraries in Nigeria can cope with the evanescent nature of digitally held resources in virtual libraries.

The idea that a virtual library is free and cheaper than conventional print based library could result in reduced funding for university libraries, since there would be no need to store books or serials and documents and no need to pay librarians. The fear is that the illusion of a great expectation for virtual libraries can spell doom for the continued development of traditional library collections. In Nigeria, it will still be a while before students discard their allegiance to and preference for the traditional library service. This is in consonance with Ifidon’s (1999) view that new technology cannot completely supersede or supplant the earlier ones, because libraries, scholars, the reading public and publishers are likely to continue to use one form of the different formats as is appropriate. Therefore stultifying the development of traditional print-based library service altogether could leave a lasting negative impact on the students’ academic development.
One challenge that is universal for collating a virtual library is that the web and Internet are very democratic, and so anybody can place and retrieve any document there. Some of the documents do not undergo editorial review and the entire electronic document delivery system has no modality for quality control. It is therefore left to the libraries to distinguish between one item and the other, and to make judgments of quality for different materials. Another challenge to Nigerian university libraries is how to cope with the evanescent nature of electronic archives, especially with the poor nature of utility service in the area of electricity power supply.

PROSPECTS
The provision of electronically-based service to patrons has become a new duty for librarians. The virtual libraries are the only way Nigerian university libraries can meet future challenges in a world of exponentially increasing information resources output that equally offers increasingly networked and digitalized information.

The future of virtual library service is very bright for Nigerian universities as there is an evolving global integration of virtual libraries that encourages resource sharing and cooperative efforts in training and research through data connectivity. The evolution of virtual library service in Nigerian universities will serve as an empowerment tool to build capacity, innovate and cultivate a new service paradigm that will affect the institutions’ fundamental functions and operations of teaching, learning and research positively.

RECOMMENDATIONS
In view of the problems impeding effective delivery of virtual library services in Nigerian universities, the following recommendations are made:
1. The pursuit of an ‘aggressive’ information literacy action plan: Immediate action must be taken by the universities and their libraries to combat the low level of information literacy among university students in Nigeria if the novel notion of a national virtual library service conceived by the National Universities Commission is to succeed. This involves designing extensive and detailed orientation short courses to be taught by qualified information professionals for the students and some library staff who do not possess information literacy capabilities. The courses will also aim at dispelling the phobia among the students for
digitally-based information service such as virtual library service, which is a new phenomenon in Nigeria.

2. It is unfortunately true that a country as endowed as Nigeria is suffering from electric power supply crisis which negatively affects all its institutions including libraries. However, concerted efforts must be made to ensure improvements on the power supply situation to libraries in the universities through the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), the government owned electricity supply monopoly, which must be sensitized to consider libraries as first line priority in power distribution. Equally, funds should be made available to the libraries by their parent institutions for the acquisition and regular maintenance of power generating sets as back-up sources in periods of power outage.

3. In an increasingly globalised world, collaboration among institutions has become a necessary practice for the attainment of organizational goals. It is also needed for keeping abreast of global trends and to ensure effectiveness in the organization's area of operation. The National Universities Commission and librarians responsible for virtual library services in Nigerian universities must seek for effective partnership with the virtual libraries of other countries, especially those who are more technologically advanced and who have mastered the art of virtual library service delivery due to longer period of practice.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that virtual libraries have come to stay as part of the information provision efforts in universities in support of teaching, learning and research. Academic excellence thrives with the provision of the right information, to the right person/group, at the right time and in a right way. The potentials of the virtual library in contributing to the actualization of the foregoing cannot be overemphasized. Nigerian universities, therefore, must brace up to accept the challenge of delving into new information provisioning terrain by starting up virtual library services on their campuses where non exists, and bolstering the service on campuses where such exists. By doing so, they will not only join a global trend, but will ultimately improve the quality of teaching, learning and research in their campuses through a wider scope of information provision. This will contribute to arresting the free fall of the standard of education as currently witnessed in Nigeria.
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