The Library Profession in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper discussed the library profession in Nigeria. It examined the fundamental features that make librarianship a unique profession. Such features include job specification, education and training, remuneration, public recognition and service orientation. It further explicated on the duties of the Nigerian Library Association which is essentially the body responsible for regulating the practice of the library profession. It recommended among other things that librarians at all levels should create awareness on the requirements and possible educational opportunities for new entrants to the profession while government should offer equal opportunities to librarians for further education for specialisation in their field.

KEYWORDS: Library Profession, Librarian, Professional, Professional Organisation

Introduction

A professional may be referred to as a worker required to possess a large body of knowledge derived from extensive academic study (usually in tertiary institutions) with the training almost always formalized. Professionals are at least, to a degree, self-regulating in the sense that they control the training and evaluation processes that admit new persons to the field and judge whether the work done by their members is up to standard. This differs from other kinds of work where regulation (if considered necessary) is imposed by the state, or where official quality standards are often lacking. Professionals have some historical links to guilds in these regard.

A French expert on the development of competencies, Le Boterf (2002) viewed a professional as "a person who possesses a personal body of knowledge and of know-how which is recognized and valued by the market". The author further asserted that "this market recognition will make the professional benefit from an advantage not available to other workers;

he or she can personally manage internal or external professional mobility in a specific firm or in the international market". This is specifically true because professionals usually have autonomy in the workplace. They are expected to utilize their independent judgments and professional ethics in carrying out their responsibilities because they possess a social standing which is larger than the specific job they hold. This holds true even if they are employees instead of working on their own. Typically, a professional provides a service (in exchange for payment or salary) in accordance with established protocols for licensing, ethics, procedures, standards of service and training as well as certification.

A profession is generally agreed to be based on a systematic intellectual knowledge communicated through planned educational process. Entry into a profession is limited to people who have undergone some specified educational training or programme (Sally, 1998). In view of this monopoly, professions generally exercise some control over training, certification and accreditation of courses, registration and standards of practice. Lawal (2002) also highlighted five criteria for the determination of professionalism to include the knowledge-based theory, the skill factor, existence of a professional organization, public recognition and a service orientation. Observing these characteristics, one can conclude that the library profession is a profession already rated by public view. However, no other profession is quite so troubled by the murky identification of the educated practitioner. Thus, the clerk at the circulation desk is often called a librarian, a mistake made so often.

In corroboration with the above author, Aguolu and Aguolu (2002:438) identified the essential elements of a profession as "requiring specialized body of knowledge and skill required during a prolonged period of education and training, existence of a professional association which defines admission into the profession". The authors also argued that "the respect and recognition accorded a profession by society are largely determined by the public understanding and acceptance of the importance of the profession in that society". This further shows that the status of the library profession is determined by the society's perception of the nature of librarians' duties and social responsibilities. Even though the society fails to realize these duties, librarians are often expected to take part in community affairs, cooperating in the preparation of exhibits, presenting book reviews, explain library use to community organizations and use their wealth of knowledge in developing the cultural taste of library patrons. This feature of a profession is an index for its choice by librarians.

When compared to older professions like Law and Medicine in any society, the consensus of opinions among experts in library and information science is that librarians and information scientists still have a problem of recognition and respect (Aguolu and Aguolu, 2002; Ugah and Ntui, 2005). As Darch (1975:499) viewed it, "the concern for status among librarians is perhaps more than simply an anxious pre-occupation with academic, social climbing, is as true in Africa as everywhere". This further explains that despite its educational requirements, library and information science has not been widely accepted as an academic activity in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Thus the problem of status of the library profession is not restricted to any one group of librarians. It is generally agreed that the library is the heart of the university and therefore, the quality of the university is reflected by the quality of the library. Yet it is widely observed that most faculty members are unable to distinguish between professional library staff and their various subordinate staff members working in the university library.

Review of Related Literature

A librarian is an information professional trained in library and information science, which is the organization and management of information services or materials for those with information needs. Typically, Librarians may be categorized as public, school, special, independent or academic librarians. Some librarians are independent entrepreneurs working as information specialists, cataloguers, indexers, publishers and other professional specialized capacities. The term "librarian" is used often and incorrectly to refer to anyone who works in a library. Para-professional or clerical staff working in a library is more properly referred to as library clerks, library assistants or some equivalent title. In a library, there are many positions other than that of librarians, such positions include library associate, clerk, and shelver. Professional positions such as manager, director or administrator are often filled by professional librarians. In these positions, the worker may be given the title administrator, director, manager or librarian.

Every individual who has attained a certain level of education is encouraged to set high aspirations for himself and to work hard to achieve these goals. People are increasingly made to become aware of the prestige that goes along with certain professions. As such, professional features like, job specification, education, remuneration, public recognition and service orientation are used as pressures to induce individuals into predetermined professions. The greater bulk of librarians' work lies in helping others find information and select materials best suited to their needs. Librarians as professional work in public, academic, special and school libraries, media centres, corporations and government agencies. They are key personnel wherever information materials are catalogued and stored; they also help make access to these reference materials possible. Thus, Librarianship is a profession that crosses the boundaries of time and space (Hopke, 2005). Library and information services are however expanding in Nigeria. Consequently, professional personnel are required as the basis for effective and efficient library services.

Librarians' Professional Organization

Every professional institutes and operates a professional organization to which it ascribes certain functions and powers. A professional organization provides the essential framework for regulating the practice of the profession by its members while reviewing and setting up standards to follow. Peretomode (1999) asserted that professional organisations have the right to admit new members or strike out the names of erring members; thus, professional organisations regulate public recognition and confidence. Most professional organisations draw their membership primarily from well-defined career fields or professions. The basic function of a professional organization is to serve as a collegiate "home" for its members, but the emphasis varies from profession to profession. Membership of any professional organization is limited to people engaged in a particular field of specialization.

In Nigeria, there are varied professional organisations such as the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Nigerian Library Association (NLA), Nigerian Institution of Surveyors and Estate Valuers (NISEV), Nigerian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (NIQS), Nigerian Society of Engineers (NSE), Pharmaceutical Society of Nigeria (PSN), Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) and Nigerian Institute of Bankers (NIB). Membership qualifications in these professional organisations are broader than for the social groups and emphasize activities designed to develop professional competency rather than social

life. Membership in these bodies is based on general scholarship and is usually open to both men and women.

While enumerating professional organisations as one of the criterion for professionalism, Lawal (2002:9) viewed a professional organization to be "that which assesses an occupation's grounds for the interchange of ideas, self-control and benefit both for the practice as a whole". The author further asserted that "in order that this criterion may be met in full, it would be required that the organization is "formal" and "effective". The library association and virtually all professional organizations' goals is excellence. It is concerned with the production of specialists, learned and esteemed practitioners who are versed in theory and competence. Flexner cited in Lawal (2002:6), while giving an evaluation of professional organisations, stated that "a profession was intellectual and carried with it personal responsibility for the exercise of choice and judgement, and the professional practice include a number of techniques or skills by means of which the knowledge acquired could be applied to solve relevant problems". Flexner, who seems to agree with Lawal (2002) above, summarized by merging the intellectual and practical functions of the profession under the direction and guide of an organized body of associations of practicing professionals.

Lawal (2002) also asserted that "the growth of professional associations was stimulated by the education and training objectives of the professions". In line with these educational and training objectives of professions, he observed thus:

> "the rise of the professions in the United Kingdom was undoubtedly strengthened by the conservatism of the universities, particularly Oxford and Cambridge. Professional associations were partly because there existed no possibility of training students in the new techniques required by the new professions other than in courses organized by the professional associations themselves" (p.72).

This is one of the areas in which any professional association including the Library Association should actively function. Ogundipe (2005:218) stated that "this could best be achieved by an active concern and effective participation by the association in the education and training of its members". The author further stated that "an active concern and participation does not mean that the professional body should be an examining body". Thus the Library Association should not be responsible for teaching since teaching is an outcome of study and research, rather it could be a certifying body engaged either directly by awarding diplomas or indirectly by recognizing the diploma awarded by other bodies, schools or universities.

Ogundipe (2005) concluded by stating that:

> "the professional organization more than any other body is able to access the educational need of the profession because it includes within it a comprehensive collection of members of the profession who are aware at all times in the course of their duties either as bottom of the ladder workers or top most administrators of the educational requirements of the practice of the profession" (p.219).

Hilliard in Lawal (2002:73) enumerated factors of motivation in the development of professional associations thus; "In considering the activities of any professional body, it is helpful to visualize two main concerns:

> (1)   Concern to provide a framework for the development of the individual professional;

> (2)   Concern to influence the creation of the social framework within which the profession as a whole can develop". People partially satisfy their need for identity and significance in their profession. In modern society, people in professional organisations constitute an important source of identity and social significance. They offer rewards that differ from those of the intimate gemeinschaft. Generally, most members of a group or an occupation – professional body identify with an affiliational community on a national or even worldwide basis (for example, the legal, medical or social work communities); yet professional organisations offer much at the level of the region or the immediate locale. They offer themes, justification and ways and means for people of like minds to gather and pursue collective goals (Richard, 2005).

Fundamental Features of the Library Profession in Nigeria

Job Specification

The library profession is a versatile and exciting career. It draws people from different subject specifications, fields and backgrounds. Building a representative workforce that reflects everyone served by information is critical to making a library a welcoming and accessible space for all (Hayden, 2003). Several studies carried out have indicated that most people chose the profession as a result of the nature of work librarians do. Some community college librarians as cited in Berry (2007) attributed their preference for librarianship to the work environment i.e. the type of work librarians do and the library challenges. Some however expressed their dislike for the library profession when they noted that they view reference and special library services as demanding and stressful especially when they have to deal with users who are working under deadline pressure. Most respondents had similar views when they observed that librarians in the technical section of the library had a backlog of daily chores; as such, they suffered eye-strain and headaches from working long hours in front of a computer. This therefore made them skeptical about the library profession.

Kanle (2006) identified and listed the job specification of librarians which attract people to the profession:

> (i)   Enjoyment in helping and serving people.

> (ii)   Interest in developing and providing services and resources that inform and entertain.

> (iii)   Willingness to connect people who possess a variety of value and belief systems to materials that represent multiple points of view. In a bid to help connect people with the information they require, the librarian has a number of tasks to carry out, some technical, others personal.

The duties of professional librarians are mainly book selection and collection development, cataloguing and classification of library materials, reader education and instruction and liaison with academic staff (Ogundipe, 2005). Professional librarians in academic libraries serve a post-secondary institution. Thus many different types and sizes of collections are found in academic libraries, and some academic librarians are specialists in these collections and archives. Academic librarians administer various levels of tasks, services and privileges to faculty, students, alumni and the public.

Education and Training

By education of library professionals, we should examine the librarian, the librarian in training as well as individuals who have chosen the profession as a career. Ikoro (2001:144) subscribed to this when he enumerates the different categories of staff training thus:

> *There are different types of staff training and development programmes such as simple orientation, organized visits to other libraries, seminars and conferences, participatory management, internal or in-house training programmes, short courses and formal professional education. Others are library trainee, industrial training for library student, staff manual for self-development research/sabbatical leave.*

There has been an increasing awareness among library and information practitioners concerning the future of the profession over the next decades. Oduagwu (2001) stated in addition to this that the need for (staff) training cannot be over-emphasized, pointing out that such training improves efficiency and morale, provides for succession and raises the standard of personnel, etc.

One of the most important as well as recent aspects of librarianship in this century has been the emergence of library schools as a potent factor in training librarians, shaping new philosophies and new attitudes about the library profession. In Nigeria, different professions have regulatory bodies which influence the academic and professional preparation of their practitioners. Lawal (2002:91) stated that in professional education, the raising of standards of qualifications for entry to the profession is another mark of a strong professional association. The author stated further that "in principle, concern with education and training should be one of the preferred priorities of a professional association; but in practice, the ideals are sometimes difficult to attain where for instance the association has no authority from government to control its education system or even influence the trends through the usual accreditation schemes". Ogundipe (2005) supported this view when he posited that all professional organisations function also as a welfare organization, and its educational and training programmes should be particularly concerned with this. It is partly as a welfare programme that the library association should see to it, by its education and training programme, which all its members are trained to do their job better, are adequately rewarded for improved services and are therefore happy at their jobs. Thus the profession would be able to maintain high standards of efficiency and professional service.

The controversy about qualifications and status in the profession would have been unnecessary if employers, library schools and librarians were guided in their assessment of the qualifications by the entry requirements, the duration and orientation of the courses and the course contents (Ojo-

Igbinoba, 1995). However, more universities and similar tertiary institutions do offer equal opportunities to librarians for further training for specialization as is offered to teaching staff.

Remuneration

Money possesses significant motivating power in as much as it symbolizes intangible goals like security, power, prestige and a feeling of accomplishment and success. Katz, in Sinclair *et al.* (2005), demonstrated the motivational power of money in any profession by explaining that money has the power to attract, retain and motivate individuals towards higher performance. For instance, if a librarian or information professional has another job offer which has identical job characteristics with his current job, but greater financial reward, that worker would in all probability be motivated to accept the new job offer.

The pay package of the librarian naturally depends on the economic, social and cultural conditions in a given country. A librarian who cannot get sufficient wage will be faced with the problem of maintaining his or her family's life. According to Lawal (2002), the grading definition of librarians according to salary scales and library position is one of the most significant factors of status concerns. Usually, the principles guiding any grading exercise are followed strictly in academic communities where appropriate factors are taken into account. However, in the public and government sectors of the profession, the librarian's salary may be comparable to the scales of clerks. This situation is universally undesirable. The author stressed further that in the U.K., the Library Association's Manpower and Conditions of Service Committee in liaison with the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) have jointly conducted a national review of the existing grading prescription for librarians so as to determine whether it is relevant to the changing needs of library service. Lawal emphasized concern for the local authorities who seem to place librarians below the minimum scales recommended by the profession. Job satisfaction cannot be talked of where there is absence of motivation in terms of higher wages. Good pay for the librarian who has an important place in the information society can affect the quality of the service he renders and can also motivate a librarian towards greater productivity.

Public Recognition

One of the attributes of a profession, according to Hernon (1991), is that society holds the profession in esteem. Therefore, Abubakar (2004) identified possible factors that create low public image for the library and information science profession to include the following:

(i)   the services provided are not appreciated by the society,

(ii)   low status of library and information workers in the society,

(iii)   librarianship is a work that can be done without a degree, and

(iv)   it is not a money-making profession.

From Abubakar's (2004) study, it is deduced that many librarians in Nigeria did not choose the profession because of the status it held in the society but only opted for it as the next available option. The misconception about librarianship stems from an individual's understanding of the profession and the public understanding and acceptance of the importance of the library in that

society. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) lent support to the above misconception of the role of libraries in national development as a problem facing the library profession in Nigeria. The authors also indicated that very few Nigerians can be said to understand librarians' social role.

The status of the profession is therefore determined by the public or society's recognition of what librarians' duties and social responsibilities are. To boost public recognition of Librarians, the Federal Government has conferred on the Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), the powers to maintain discipline within the profession, determine standards of knowledge and skills to be attained by persons seeking to be registered as Librarians. To earn societal acceptance, librarians are often expected to take part in community affairs, cooperating in the preparation of exhibits, presenting book reviews and explaining library use to community organisations. Recognition of a profession by the public depends on the nature of service which the profession renders. It must be such service that is very essential to humanity. Also, the practitioners must have high self-esteem and self-satisfaction must be demonstrated by the members of the profession. Therefore, poor conditions of service can erode recognition by the public.

Service Orientation

Service orientation is closely linked with public recognition but both terms are not mutually exclusive. Service orientation implies that a profession provides a service for the public good or the good of society in general (Lawal, 2002). In line with this view, Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) stated that libraries are social agencies for progress, cultural enrichment and public enlightenment. The authors also asserted that libraries are subject to the political, cultural, economic and intellectual forces operating in the society in which they exist.

Generally, individuals do not recognize librarians' duties to their immediate communities. Therefore, Peretomode (1999) stated that recognition by the public depends on the nature of the service which the profession renders and must be such that is essential to humanity. The bulk of library professional practice lies in its concern with human knowledge. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002; 35) identified library roles in society as knowledge conservation, information, education, research, culture and entertainment. In line with this, Nwosu (2006) also stated that the role of the library in societal progress is therefore easily discernable as it is the store of human knowledge, facilitating access to it to engender progress. The author stated further that lack of appreciation of the role of library profession is the root cause of the poor attitude of the society to the profession.

Conclusion

The fundamental features of the library profession are dynamic and susceptible to changes as the economy, availability of information and public awareness alters. The implication of this is that we live in a society where the country's economy continues to expand following upsurge in technological advancements. The role of librarians in nation building cannot be over-emphasised. Therefore, as the nature of many jobs change and the techniques of its provision to individuals, the increasing role of the library profession should be made visible and its techniques upheld.

Recommendations

1. Librarians in tertiary institutions should administer various levels of tasks, services and privileges to faculty, students, alumni and the public. This will in turn serve as a source of inspiration that will make people appreciate the nature of work librarians do.
2. There should be an awareness programme on the requirements and possible educational opportunities for new entrants to the library profession. Tertiary institutions should offer equal opportunities to librarians for further education for specialisation in their chosen area.
3. Outside salaries, government should provide fringe benefits to librarians in academic institutions to enhance satisfactory performance, thereby serving as motivation to greater productivity for them and encouragement for those who may wish to join the library profession.
4. The Federal Government should support the Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) which is saddled with the responsibility of maintaining professional ethics, to achieve its broad goal. These will in turn create public awareness on the role librarians play in nation building.

5. All tiers of government in Nigeria should prioritise and support the library cause, so that awareness as to the roles of libraries as well as librarians in the society may be created. Since the practice of librarianship lies in its concern with human knowledge, librarians should render more essential services to humanity so as to make individuals develop greater admiration for the profession.

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