The Availability of Information Resources and Services for Quality Research of Postgraduate Religious Studies Students at Kwame Nkrumah University

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Abstract: *The focus of this article is on the availability of information resources and services for quality research of Postgraduate Religious Studies students at Kwame Nkrumah University in Zambia. The objectives of the study were to establish students' familiarity with the institutional library and its services; whether student researchers had access to available information repositories; and to find out if the information in stock was adequate and relevant to students' study programme. The research sample comprised 21 students, 5 librarians and 4 lecturers from Religious Studies Department. Theoretically premised on Berry Ralph's view on the role of the library and its staff in the student's research project, the study drew upon the data obtained through a semi-structured questionnaire, interviews and Focus Group Discussions. The Primary data were analysed thematically and the findings were that not all postgraduate student researchers visited the library regularly for information seeking; as such many were not acquainted with the facility and its functionality. The few who patronised the library were not satisfied with the information they obtained because it was either inadequate or irrelevant to their studies. Factors leading to these findings were established and appropriate measures to address the situation were suggested, most importantly, a recommendation for Kwame Nkrumah University to introduce a sustainable library orientation programme for newly recruited students.*

Keywords: *Information Resources, Quality Research, Postgraduate, Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the availability of information resources and services linked to them, for quality research of the Postgraduate Religious Studies students at Kwame Nkrumah University (hereinafter referred to as KNU) in Zambia. As an institution of higher learning, Kwame Nkrumah was first established under the name *Kabwe Teachers' Training College* in 1967 and later renamed as *NkrumahTeachers Training College* in 1971 in recognition and honour of the founding President of Ghana. In 2007, the institution became a University College under affiliation with the University of Zambia and was later declared a University in 2013. In 2017, the Kwame Nkrumah University became a fully-fledged University after undergoing full transformation, a development which earned it a status of being one of Zambia's eight Public Universities. The 2017 transformation also saw the establishment of the Directorate of Research, Postgraduate Studies and Innovation with the Master of Arts in Religious Studies being among the first five learning programmes introduced at Postgraduate level, with first enrollment of 32 students. Subsequent enrollments in the programme have brought the current cumulative total number of successful graduates in the Masters of Religious Studies programme to 54.

An investigation on the availability and utilisation of information resources and services for the postgraduate students at such an emerging institution of higher learning like KNU is therefore necessary in planning and working towards guaranteeing quality research.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The availability of information resources and services for Postgraduate Religious Studies Students at KNU were not known. Students' challenges involving access to information resources as reflected in

their research works that pointed to inadequacy of relevant information resources had become a matter of concern. This necessitated the inquiry as the obtaining situation had potential of leading to poor quality research production at the intuition.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The general aim of the study was to establish the availability of information resources and services for quality Postgraduate Religious Studies Students' research at Kwame Nkrumah University.

Specific objectives were:

- To find out whether there was adequate and relevance information resources in stock and services for the Postgraduate Religious Studies researchers

- To assess the students' familiarity with the institutional library facility

- To determine whether the Postgraduate Religious Studies Students had access to the available information resources and services

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND BRIEF REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretically, the study is premised on Berry Ralph's view on the role of the library and its staff in the student's research project. Berry (1994) contends that the students' first task upon arrival at an institution of [higher] learning is to acquaint themselves with the information resources available. The obvious place they start with, he says, is the institutional Library, where they approach the library staff for the information they can provide. For researchers such as the postgraduate students, in Berry's view, making acquaintance of library staff is always something of high priority. This is because they should know all about the facility of the library, for neglecting the personnel channels to information resources would be something likely to work against students' wishes of conducting quality research.

2.1. The Library Staff

Increasingly, libraries are becoming much more than collections of books and, to obtain the fullest benefits from them, the students should not hesitate to consult the library staff. Berry contends that he had invariably found librarians to be courteous and helpful, always anxious that their library should be efficiently used. He argues that the librarian is the expert and that the expert should be consulted.

2.2. Sections of the Library *2.2.1. Open Shelves*

Once contact has been made with the librarian, students may feel that the obvious place to begin research is the *open shelves*. Certainly the familiarity with their layout is essential. There are two principal classifications: the *Dewey Decimal System* and the *Library of Congress Classification*. The former allows books to be arranged based on subject matte while the latter uses letters and/or numbers to arrange books of same topics together.

Berry (1994) contends that familiarity with these methods of placing books will enable students to go straight to what seems the most relevant section for their purpose. But to begin a research project here, at the open shelves, is inadequate and may prove misleading. He says this is because certain books may be out on loan, while others may be held in stock in the basement. Besides, the physical grouping of books on a shelf may not correspond to the complexities of the subject.

While in the library, one logical place a student can begin his / her research is the **catalogue**. The catalogue is the *register of all the books in the library*. There are different methods of cataloguing the books, such as by author, and students will need to spend a little time familiarising themselves with the one used by their own library. Subject cards are normally used in the search for books.

2.3. The Coming of New Technology

With the dawn of new technology, students may also need to familiarise themselves with other means of cataloguing, such as the card index. As stocks of books increase and space become limited, libraries increasingly turn to new forms of technology. One such method is the use of microforms and microfiches.

2.3.1. Microform Room

Microform room is the room in which microfilm and microfiche are stored. However, since microforms have become *obsoletetechnology*, they are being gradually replaced by microfiches, which can hold a large number of titles (Winkler and Metherell, 2012).

2.4. Indexes and Bibliographies

Indexes and bibliographies help the researcher to identify and locate a single book or journal article from among the millions published. There are many specialised indexes and bibliographies unique to religious studies topics. These can be very useful in a literature search to find authors and titles of prior works on the topic of interest (Blumberg *et al*. 2014: 105).

2.5. The Bibliography Section

The Bibliography section of the library provides students with a guide to information on their subjects more comprehensive than that readily discoverable from the catalogue. As its name implies, it is concerned with providing information about what books or articles have appeared on any given subject, whether stocked by that library or not (*Ibid*).

2.6. Other Sources of Secondary Data in the Library

Blumberg *et al*. (2014: 104) suggest the following as some of the other bibliographic databases that may be available to researchers in the library:

2.6.1. Google Scholar

This is not really a database but a *search engine* that is specialised in finding academic sources. It is very useful in finding articles and also books, but the sources found are not full-text accessible.

2.6.2. Working Paper Databases

In many disciplines, it often takes years until a research paper is finally published in a respectable journal. However, before that, many papers are available as *working papers*, also called *discuss papers.* These working papers are often available at the website of the schools the authors are affiliated to or on the researchers' home pages.

2.6.3. Publisher's Database

Major publishers of academic journals currently allow you to search for all articles that have appeared in their journals. Access to full text is mostly limited to those schools that also have a subscription to a specific journal.

2.6.4. Newspaper Racks

Many libraries subscribe to major national and foreign newspapers. Current issues are generally displayed on long wooden clumps, known as *newspaper racks* that hold and store the newspapers. Often the racks are surrounded by comfortable chairs on which you can sit and read.

2.6.5. Carrels

Carrels are small, semi-enclosed desks equipped with bookshelves and designed to provide students with a quiet, insulated nook for reading or researching. The carrels section of a library is set aside for students' intent on serious scholarship.

3. METHODOLOGY

Methodically, the study used a Semi-structured Questionnaire, Focus Group Discussions and interviews to collect data from a sample of 30 informants drawn from KNU as follows: Twenty-one (21) Postgraduate Religious Studies Students, 5 members of staff from the library and 4 lecturers from the Religious Studies Department. Purposive and non-probability sampling method was applied to the entire population considering the predetermined nature of the information that was required and the size of the study population. Seven (7) students were approached right at the campus during their residential school, while the rest of the 14 (some of whom had already graduated from their studies at the time of the study) were followed up from their respective locations in the country, during the period 2021 to 2022. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied. A qualitative method

was used to collect information pertaining to the opinions and views of the respondents while a (simple) quantitative method was used to collect statistical data. The questionnaire was designed in such a manner that it provided for both quantitative and qualitative data and was administered either personally or online. Focus Group Discussions and in-depth interviews were applied personally to selected informants during follow-ups for in-depth information.

3.1. Data Analysis

The *Thematic Approach* to data analysis was applied, where Primary data were analysed qualitatively by way of identifying themes that emerged from the findings and making sense of them. The article does not claim that the responses of the participants in the study represent the views and experiences of all the postgraduate students, as only 30 respondents from a particular stream of students and staffs from selected departments were reported.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The general findings of the study show that the postgraduate Religious Studies Student researchers often visited the KNU library for information seeking on their various research tops, as shown in the table below:

Table1. *Visitation of KNU Library by Postgraduate Religious Studies Student Researchers*

RESPONSE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Very Often	0	0
Often	21	100
Rarely	0	0
Never	0	0
Total	21	100

Source: *Field data*

The most sought items from the facility were those information resources to do with secondary data for students' respective research topics, e-library services; to find recommended books for students' assigned readings in their different taught courses and for updating their knowledge with the study materials that were introduced in respective subject fields. Among students who often visited the library were also those who went to access internet services, those who went to update themselves on current affairs from the Newspapers section and those who went for a peaceful/quiet studying environment provided by the facility. Only in very rare cases (6%) did students visit the library for consultations from library staff and to get directed to information repositories. The summary of results is as presented in the table below:

Table2. *Types of services Students Sought from KNU Library*

S/N	SERVICE TYPE	PERCENTAGE
1	Access to Internet	12.5
2	Course Reference Books	12.5
3	Consultancy and/or directions to repositories from library staff	6
4	Current Affairs from Newspapers	12.5
5	Data gathering for research	31.5
6	e-Library services	12.5
7	Peaceful environment for studying, research & reflection	12.5

Source: *Field data*

In response to the question which sought to find out how useful or relevant the KNU library was to Postgraduate Religious Studies student researchers, the results were as tabulated below:

Table3. *How useful KNU library was to Postgraduate Religious Studies Student Researchers*

RESPONSE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Very Useful	2	9
Useful	14	67
Not Useful at all	5	24
Total	21	100

Source: *Field data*

The majority (67%) of the respondents said the library was quite useful. However, this category of the interviewees was quick to justify that the facility was only useful to the extent that it supplied them with basic supplement information for their literature review on their research topics, which data was often outdated. Another considerable (24%) category of the respondents outrightly said they did not find the facility useful in any way.

On the question that sought to find out about students' acquaintance with the various sections of the library and functions thereof, respondents gave answers that reflected varied levels of knowledge of the four general library compartments deliberately used in the question item to test their familiarity, namely the "Open Shelves", " Reference Section", " Short-Loan", and " Special Collection".

Open Shelve: Invariably referred to as the Public Section of the library, this is one section that was obviously expected to be familiar to postgraduate student researchers, as one section that constituted a system of library organisation in which books are so shelved as to permit direct examination and selection by patrons. The table below summarise the analysis:

Table4. *Students' Familiarity with the Open Shelves Section*

QUESTION ITEM	EXPECTED RESPONSE	SCORE	%
Open Shelves / Public Service Section	Open Shelf System constitutes a system of library organisation in which books are so shelved as to permit direct examination and selection by patrons	Correct **10**	Correct **47**
		Wrong **11**	Wrong **53**
Total			**100**

Source: *Field data*

However, only forty-seven per cent (47%) of the total interviewees gave responses that were within the context of the expected description of this section, implying that the majority (53%) were not familiar with the open shelves.

*Reference Section***:** This is another crucial section of the library that contains information-dense resources, such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, thesauri, atlases, *et cetera,* which library patrons at the level of postgraduate students were expected to have utilised for their benefit. Results on students" familiarity with this section were as tabulated below:

Table5. *Students' Acquaintance with the Reference Section*

QUESTION ITEM	EXPECTED RESPONSE	SCORE	%
Reference Section	The Reference Section of the library contains information-dense resources, such as the Encyclopedia, Dictionaries, Thesauri, Atlases, *et cetera.*	Correct **04**	Correct **19**
		Wrong **17**	Wrong **18**
	Total	**21**	**100**

Source: *Field data*

According to this study, however, eighty-one per cent (81%) of the respondents expressed ignorance about what the reference section was, and what it contained. For instance, one respondent described the section as one with material only for one specific subject matter; another respondent said it was a section where students could find old books (the kind *of responses the researcher found difficult to decipher*), while a good number of respondents said they did not know anything about the section since they had not visited it.

*Short Loan Section***:** As yet another crucial section of the library, the Short loan unit houses books and other items that are needed by large numbers of students. Results from respondents were as presented in the table below:

Table6. *Students' Knowledge about the Short Loan Section*

QUESTION ITEM	EXPECTED RESPONSE	SCORE	%
Short Loan Section	The Short Loan Section in the library is where we keep books and other items that are needed by large numbers of students	Correct **10**	Correct **48**
		Wrong **11**	Wrong **52**
	Total	**21**	**100**

Source: *Field data*

Only Forty-eight per cent (48%) of the respondents expressed familiarity with the section, though there were no clear indications of them having accessed it. Of the other category (52%) of the respondents who were not familiar with this section, one claimed she had never heard of anything like Short Loan Section, while three respondents ignorantly remarked that such a section was not existent at KNU.

Special Collection: Postgraduate Religious Studies researchers were also expected to be acquainted with this important section of the library that houses a group of items, such as those books and documents deemed to be rare and irreplaceable. The table below summaries the responses:

Table7. *Students' Familiarity with the Special Collection Section*

QUESTION ITEM	EXPECTED RESPONSE	SCORE	%
Special Collection Section	A Special Collection is a group of items, such as rare books or documents that are either irreplaceable or unusually rare and valuable	Correct **03**	Correct **14**
		Wrong **18**	Wrong **86**
	Total	**21**	**100**

Source: *Field data*

The findings of the study, nevertheless, reveal that the majority (86%) of respondents did not know this section. The few (14%) who said they knew the Special Collection ignorantly told the researcher that this particular section did not exist at the KNU library. The only respondent who acknowledged the existence of the section said it lacked relevant books; hence it would have been a waste of effort and time to patronise it.

4.1. Inadequate or Non-Availability of Relevant Information Resources in the Library

Twenty-four per cent of the respondents who visited the library said the information resources they found in the library were inadequate and irrelevant to their studies, while the library staff also confirmed the non-availability of some information resources, such as diaries, letters, manuscripts and tapes, artefacts, microforms and /or microfiches. While we appreciate this revelation by the current study, it should also be noted that the situation may have been exacerbated by students' general illiteracy in information seeking which led to their failure to discover some of the available information sources. Regrettably, the study revealed that even some library attendants were not aware of some of the information resources available in the library.

4.2. Problems Associated with Poor Access to Information Resources and Services by Students

The root causes of problems affecting many students entangled with the problem of unfamiliarity with the library functionality are quite many and complex, with most of them being shrouded in the poor background to reading culture.

4.3. PoorBackground to Reading Culture

The problem of poor background to reading culture and the repercussions thereof is something that cannot be over-emphasised. The Zambia National Union of Teachers (ZNUT) Secretary General, Newman Bubala, noted that "lack of reading material in many Zambian communities resulted in poor reading culture (Zambia Daily Nation, November 22, 2016). He attributed the poor reading habits to low reading levels in the country, which he said resulted from the lack of learning/reading material across the country, especially at the primary school level. As if to suggest a combination of factors

working together to compound the poor reading levels, Bubala further brought in the teacher and parent factors in the poor reading problem. Teachers, he observed, never spend much time on learners when it comes to teaching how to read, instead of being part of the solution to what he termed as an alarming culture of poor reading. Concerning parents being another factor in the poor reading culture, the ZANUT Secretary-General said it was high time they (parents) invested in the education of their children by playing a supplementary role to the Government efforts. He observed that one way they would do this was by buying necessary reading materials for their children because the Government alone could not afford them. He extended the clarion call to the private sector and the general public, whom he urged to partner with the Government in supporting the development of reading culture among Zambians *(ibid)*.

The study conducted by Hachintu in 2016 to assess the *Effects of Poor-Reading Culture on DistanceEducation Students' Academic Performance at KNU* further revealed other compounding factors to reading background that scholars found to have hindered learners from acquiring good reading habits, especially in the sub-Saharan Africa. Among the factors cited, the following are pertinent to this study:

4.3.1. Poverty

In sub-Saharan Africa, the impact of poverty is deeply felt. Only a few people live above the poverty line. About 80% of Africans live under hazardous conditions, with as low as two dollars per capita income in most sub-Saharan countries. This, in no little measure, affects the reading habits of people. Many are too poor to buy their children books to read.

4.3.2. Dearth of Libraries

Libraries play an important role in the promotion of reading habits. However, these libraries (school and public) are either non-existent or not playing their expected role. State and local government and proprietors of schools do not comply with library provisions as provided in the National Policy on Education. For instance, public libraries are not being established where they are needed.

4.4. Can Poor Access to Information Resources and Services Contribute to Dishonest in Acquiring Marks?

Given the revelation of the current study, one would obviously wonder how postgraduate students at KNU might have managed to undertake successful research, let alone successfully graduate in their study programme, against the backdrop of underutilising the available information resources due to poor access to information repositories and inadequate stocks of relevant books at the institution's library. In his study, Hachintu (2016) reports a situation which may be a replica of a scenario in the current study, where for fear of obvious repercussions of failing due to their inadequacy in preparations, students resorted to other shortcuts and illegal means to make it in academics, such as involving themselves in nepotism, corruption, cheating in assignments and hiring the services of other people in the writing of research reports.

4.4.1. Nepotism

Among the acts of dishonest students find themselves in is nepotism. This involves students using power or influence, or taking advantage of relations with some members of staff in the University, in negotiating for favours with course lecturers.

4.4.2. Corruption

Corruption has a profound effect in many African countries. In most sub-Saharan countries, corruption drastically affects citizens everywhere, from government institutions to private organisations, despite much effort made in fighting it. In schools, for instance, many students prefer to indulge in immoral acts rather than face their studies diligently. Situations like trading sex for grades, sales of ungraded textbooks to students at high fees, using money to buy examination grades, and cheating in examinations abound in institutions of higher learning. Those who engage in these infamous acts consider reading [or patronising the library for research] a waste of time *(Ibid)*.

4.4.3. Cheating in Assignment Writing and Hiring the Services of other People

Students with poor access to information resources are more likely to find it difficult when it comes to data collection and report writing, mainly due to their poor-reading background. This ultimately makes it practically difficult for them to undertake quality research. In their desperate efforts to pass, some may resort to using dishonest means such as submitting duplicated assignments and hiring the services of other people in the writing of research reports. Like at any other higher institution of learning, such seemingly petty cases of dishonesty have occasionally surfaced at KNU. Hachintu further reports a conspiracy which was exposed in 2016 where certain individuals had strategically positioned themselves at some places in town away from the campus during residential school, and secretly advertised their services to write assignments and research reports on behalf of the "unprepared" Distance Education Students. Today, it is not uncommon and no longer a secret to see pop-up advertisements on online media, of people offering help to write project proposals and research reports on any topic, on behalf of postgraduate students at quite substantial amounts of money. In the current study, staff from KNU's Religious Studies Department expressed concern over the lack of originality in some students' research work which they attributed to students cheating during report writing. This, they observed, raised legal concerns such as plagiarism repercussion.

Indeed, students cheating raise great concerns among educationists who are worried about the quality of research output among students of higher learning institutions being on the wane.

4.4.4. The Need to Orient Students to the Library and Information Repositories

The study's revelation was clear in pointing to the fact that most students were not familiar with the library facility, its services and information resources, due to a lack of orientation. It should be noted that underestimating the importance of the role of the University in orientating students to the library and its functionality is detrimental to students' academic progress and to the institution's research integrity. Many Universities have recognised this role as crucial in providing quality education and credible research to learners. This is because, as Winkler &Metherell (2012) observe, most instructors consider the library to be students' most reliable guide to research papers that draw on the published work of experts. This is why, the duo argues, instructors in some Universities require that part of each research paper reflects the use of resources found in their institutions' libraries. In this regard, making students familiar with their local libraries became one of the aims of the research papers.

The orientation programmes which are aimed at familiarising students with the library facility, its resources and services also touch on their academic integrity and on intriguing them in the art of database searching. Upon completion of the library orientation, students are expected to acquire basic literacy in locating resources and services within the library, understanding primary database searching, knowing where to go for assistance from the library staff and logging on to library computers, as well as searching the library's website. They also acquire basic knowledge in online cataloguing and recognising academic issues of integrity.

The rationale behind orienting library patrons is to enable them to determine the nature and extent of the information needed, access needed information efficiently in an effective manner and evaluate such information critically in order to incorporate it into their knowledge base and value system. Above all, the information-literate students will understand many of the social, legal and economic issues surrounding the use of information and accesses, thereby being able to use the obtained information legally and ethically.

5. CONCLUSION

Investigating the availability of information resources and services for quality research of the Postgraduate Religious Studies students at KNU is the focus of this study. The study has revealed that not all postgraduate student researchers visited the library regularly for information seeking. The few that patronised the facility still did not reap good benefits from the available information repositories because they were not adequately acquainted with the library facility and its functionality. Three factors that contributed to students' lack of familiarity with the library leading to poor access to the available information resources and services were identified. The first one consisted of the poor reading habits by

students, which could have been caused by their poor background to reading, the second involved students' information-seeking illiteracy that partially resulted from their not having utilised the expertise of library staff in accessing the available information, while the third one being the lack of students' orientation to the library facility and its functionality. These constituted the major hindrances to conducting quality research by Postgraduate Religious Studies students at KNU.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the current study, the author makes the following recommendations:

i. Government, through the Ministry of Education should continue encouraging the private sector and the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) partnership in the reading campaign programmes aimed at improving the reading culture in the nation.

ii. Kwame Nkrumah University should stock its library with adequate relevant information resources

iii. KNU should introduce the library orientation programme for newly recruited students, aimed at introducing them to the facility and its functionality, as well as acquitting them with the available information resources and services. Such an orientation programme should be embedded in the institution's academic culture and be sustained as a routine activity.

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