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Partnerships for broadening access to information: the case of University of Zimbabwe Library

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Abstract:

Libraries have for long considered partnerships and collaborations as vital strategies to use in achieving their goals and objectives. The need for African libraries to focus on collaborations is even more imperative in the 21st century environment characterized by dwindling library budgets and rising costs of acquiring core textbooks and journal subscriptions. Academic Libraries are pressed with the need to provide a new approach to reach out to diverse groups of library users who include people with special needs and a new generation of young students. The task of libraries in Zimbabwe is not made easier by the persistent harsh economic conditions and competing institutional financial priorities. This paper profiles how the University of Zimbabwe Library has managed to establish and equip a Disability Resource Centre Library with assistive technologies such as pearl reading camera and book embossers for users with special needs and remodel its spaces to include facilities such as the Collaborative Learning Centre and postgraduate laboratory meant to provide postgraduate students with a dedicated environment where they can do their research. Collaborative Learning Centres are becoming an important feature in 21st Century libraries as they allow students and staff to be involved in collaborative learning and research activities and encourage students to reach out to one another to solve research problems and share knowledge that will help build collaboration skills and lead to better research. The paper will also profile how the seminar room in the library was remodelled and equipped with state of the art equipment and a sound system. All these developments were made possible courtesy of collaboration with a local bank and a philanthropic organization. The

concept of using partnerships and collaborations to broaden access to information and provide inclusive library and information services should inspire other academic libraries in Africa.

KEYWORDS: Academic Libraries, Resource Mobilization, Partnerships, Collaboration, Information Access, Library Repurposing, Library Spaces, Collaborative Learning Centres, Special Needs

Introduction

Libraries the world over are responding to the technological changes that are happening in the provision of library services. The need to satisfy library users is especially the driving force behind the implementation of technological projects in library services. As Seadle (2012) puts it, libraries “need to redefine themselves in a world where their buildings no longer represent a storehouse of knowledge unavailable elsewhere”. However, the need for libraries to redefine themselves in view of the evolving technology does not mean that technology should be replacing library services; rather technology “would be used as an important method to facilitate fulfilling its [the library’s] mission” (Massis, 2011). This paper profiles how the University of Zimbabwe Library introduced new services through partnerships with other institutions in an effort to broaden access to information to meet the needs of its users.

Libraries need to find innovative ways of financing their projects in order to provide relevant information services to their users given that government funding for libraries is usually inadequate (Alemna, 1994; Ekoja, 1996; Anglada, 2007; Sullivan, 2007; Okojie, 2010). Libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa therefore have to be actively involved in seeking and building partnerships that allow them to develop their library services in the absence of government support.

Thomas (2000) and Roberts (2007) both recognise the pressing need to integrate print resources with digital resources in the library setting as a result of the technological changes that are taking place. This is especially critical because “the library must be prepared to meet student needs” (Sandy, Krishnamurthy, & Scalfani 2014). While the integration of print resources with digital resources in the library is essential, it must be noted that this is not an easy exercise as this will involve the renovation or retrofitting of library space that was previously designed for print resources to accommodate digital resources. Beagle (1999); Thomas (2000); Bennet (2007) and Sandy, Krishnamurthy, & Scalfani (2014) all allude that libraries can be renovated and repurposed in response to the growth in the use of technology in library services.

In Africa Daniels, Darch & de Jager (2010) and Ilako & Odongo (2011) are among the authors to have written about how some libraries have repurposed their library spaces to include non-traditional library services in a bid to broaden access to information in different formats. This shows a growing trend in African academic libraries to incorporate technology inspired innovations within their services. Most of these services are made possible with support from organisations or corporations outside government.

Background

The University of Zimbabwe Library was established in 1955. It was originally located in the city centre of Harare; moved to temporary quarters in the Faculty of Education on the Main Campus in November 1955 and finally moved to the current building at the Mount Pleasant Campus in 1960. Work on extending the library building began in 1980 and was concluded in 1984.

The University of Zimbabwe Library is by far the largest and oldest and most modern academic library in the country. The library is ICT driven and is well equipped with state of the art equipment, including over 300 computers available for students to access e-resources. The library is also installed with wireless access points to enable library users to access library resources through Wi-Fi. The mission of the library is “to provide access to scholarly information resources that support the learning, teaching, research and service needs of the University community”. The print book collection in the library is over 1 million volumes which serves a population of just over 12 000 students. Apart from the print collection, the library provides access to over 300 000 e-book titles and over 50 electronic resources databases featuring over 1, 2 million journals.

The rising demand for computers for use by students to access electronic resources and to do their research put an enormous amount of pressure on the library to find a space to house computers for use by library users. The demand for access to current information to make meaningful research cannot be understated. The University of Zimbabwe also needed to get value for the money it is spending in subscribing to electronic resources and value for the money invested in the campus wide network. The investment in the network infrastructure also needed to be matched with facilities that made meaningful use of the expanded broadband network. The Periodicals Section, where more than 100 000 volumes of print periodicals were housed had been in existence since the mid-1980s after the extension of the Main Library building. The section was dismantled to create space that would house

some of the new facilities that the library was about to provide. A weeding exercise of the print collection of books created shelf space and made it possible for library staff to relocate print periodicals to other locations in the library and ultimately make way for the new innovations

Project Team

A project approach was used in the planning and implementation of the research commons and multimedia centre. As Mbambo-Thata (2010) and Sandy, Krishnamurthy, & Scalfani (2014) point out, it is important to use a project team approach to ensure the successful planning and implementation of a library project which involves information technology. A team was assembled to oversee the planning and implementation of the new innovations. The team consisted of representatives from the various units in the library which include Bibliographic Services Division, Reader Services Division, Information and Communication Technology Division and Technical Services Division. Each of the units played a crucial role on the planning and implementation of the project.

Facilities

Through partnerships with corporate organisations, the University of Zimbabwe Library managed to introduce a number of innovative services in the main library through repurposing of library spaces that were already in existence to broaden access to information by library users. The Collaborative Learning Centre, the Postgraduate Laboratory and the Seminar room were established through the support from the Beit Trust. The refurbishment of the Seminar room into a state of the art facility was also done through the support of the Beit Trust. A £50, 000 grant was availed by the Beit Trust to support the completion of the above mentioned facilities.

The Special Needs Corner in the Main Library and the Disability Resource Centre Library were supported by the Commercial Bank of Zimbabwe (CBZ) Bank Holdings.

Collaborative Learning Centre

The Collaborative Learning Centre features workstations which can be used in groups of a maximum of 5 people at a time. Collaborative Learning Centres are becoming an important feature in 21st Century Libraries. These kinds of facilities allow students and staff to be involved in collaborative learning and research activities. The power of collaborative learning cannot be underestimated. Creating new opportunities for students to reach out to one another to solve problems and share knowledge not only builds collaboration skills but

leads to deeper learning and understanding (Davis, 2012). The Collaborative Learning Centre is therefore expected to enhance the development of habits of the mind that form the foundation of scholarship in our students through providing them with a facility that allows them to access information as well as collaborate with their peers.



Figure 1: Collaborative Learning Centre

Postgraduate Computer Laboratory

The Postgraduate Computer Laboratory in the Main Library features 20 desktop computers for use by postgraduates from all faculties at the University of Zimbabwe. The Postgraduate Laboratory is giving our post graduate students a dedicated environment where they can do their research. The facility gives the postgraduate students a dedicated environment where they can access electronic journals which are crucial to their research needs. The facility has proved to be popular with the postgraduate students because prior to its introduction they used to compete with undergraduate students for computers to access research information.



Figure 2: Postgraduate Laboratory

Seminar Room

The Library Seminar Room was refurbished using a grant from Beit Trust and from being an ordinary room to a state of the art seminar room. The room was installed with retractable projection screens, a sound system, air conditioning and new furniture to provide a conducive meeting environment. Since its refurbishment, the Seminar Room is now an attractive venue for seminar presentation, training workshops and presentation meetings.

The Seminar Room is also being used for hosting University Educator Conversation Series and Brownbag Series, talks where Librarians, researchers, academics and other professionals engage, share ideas and discuss contemporary issues in academia.



Figure 3: Seminar Room

Special Needs Corner

The establishment of the Special Needs Corner in 2013 within UZ Libraries marked a significant turning point towards the enhancement of services for the visually impaired. However, notable progress towards the provision of Library services to people with special needs began in 2011 when UZ Library successfully implemented the Electronic Information for Libraries - Free and Open Source Software (EIFL-FOSS) Pilot Project. In this project, the Library installed FOSS tools for students with visual disabilities on computers in the Library and on students' laptops. A partnership with the UZ Disability Resource Centre (DRC) enabled the Library to extend the installation of these tools to the DRC Computer Laboratory and to provide more systematic training sessions. FOSS tools comprised a suite of free and open windows application tools that run from a USB Stick. The successful implementation of this project inspired the Library to explore more on additional software devices for empowering the visually impaired to access electronic resources such as e-books and e-journals for research purposes.

Further discussions with users with disabilities and research prompted the Library to think seriously about acquiring a suitable screen reading software to cater for the totally blind. Using funding from the parent institution, this led to the purchase of a Five-User license of JAWS (Job Access with Speech) together with a set of one server and five client computers from which the software could be accessed. According to Freedom Scientific, (2016), "JAWS is a screen reader developed for computer users whose vision loss prevents them

from seeing screen content or navigating with a mouse. It provides speech and Braille output for the most popular computer applications on a PC”.

A physically easy to access area was identified in the Main Library and re-designed into a “Special Needs Corner” reserved for access by students with special needs only. The area was therefore equipped with the purchased computers, JAWS and suitable furniture to enable the blind and the low vision to have expanded access to information and conduct their researches in the Library. JAWS software has promoted access to electronic information among students with visual impairments.



Figure 4: Special Needs Corner

Disability Resource Centre (DRC) Library

The introduction of the Special Needs Corner ignited a sudden surge of Library usage by students with special needs as more of these students were stimulated to visit the Library because of JAWS. As the demand for the Special Needs Corner continued to increase, the Library resolved to scale up its commitment towards the provision of adequate access solutions that would further unlock the potential of the visually impaired and increase the usage of Library resources.

There was a realisation that it was now time to do more and embrace fully assistive technology devices in a way that would significantly help to reduce the digital barriers for the visually impaired within the UZ Libraries. The Library therefore began a process of product search and consultations with relevant stakeholders which included the distributing agents, UZ internal departments namely Student Affairs, Library Information Technology, and DRC. DRC is a department that was established in 1987 to provide services to people with special needs within the UZ Community.

With the Zimbabwe economy slowing down as from 2012, financial constraints remain a major challenge for Zimbabwean University Libraries, and UZ Library is not an exception. As the University coffers were not able to fund this project, the Library had to look elsewhere for funding.

A corporate sponsor was identified in the name of CBZ Bank Holdings. The UZ Library submitted proposal and the bank released a grant that greatly assisted the Library to purchase an assortment of assistive technology devices and state of the art equipment for users with special needs. This equipment facilitated the establishment of DRC Library in June 2014 as a new branch of UZ Libraries.

The grant was used to acquire the following equipment:

Table 1: DRC Library Equipment

Item	Quantity	Purpose
Additional JAWS License	30 user licenses	Screen Reading software for the visually impaired installed on DRC computers and laptops
MAGic Screen Magnification (Five-User License)	5 user licenses	The Software increases the size of text image on a monitor to allow low vision persons to access and use computers.
Book Sense	20	A portable digital audio device which can play digital books, audio files, text files, and DAISY content.
Pearl Reading Camera and Open Book	2 Sets	The PEARL combined with OpenBook brings blind and low vision users instant portable access to printed material with an array of human-sounding voices
Ultra-Merlin Desktop Magnifier	2	Facilitates improved viewing and reading of text images captured from physical books or print materials
Ruby Handheld Magnifier	10	A portable video magnifying device that provides powerful on-the-go

		magnification to enable low vision persons to read print materials.
Talking Scientific Calculator	2	For use by students who may need to use them for their statistics and other mathematical-related courses
Braille Equipment (Braille embosser, Stapler, Duxbury Braille Translation software (DBT) & auxiliary accessories	1 set	This equipment can work in conjunction with Open Book and Pearl Reading Camera to convert printed material to Braille.
Desktop Computers	20	For use by students with special in the DRC Library
Laptops	20	Ten of the computers had JAWS installed for use with blind students when they are not on campus and the other ten have networked version of Jaws installed.
Cisco Aironet Switch		Wireless Access Point that provide wireless access in the DRC Library
Computer Desks	21	Two-seater desks for Computers and laptops in DRC Library
Chairs	42	Chairs for computer and laptop users in DRC Library
IP Surveillance System	-	To ensure security of acquired equipment in the DRC Library

Some of these assistive devices were added to the Special Needs Corner, whilst the bulk of the items were used to form part of the newly created DRC Library. Given that most information in this digital era is consumed electronically, these devices have proved to be handy for low vision and the blind students. The new technologies for students with special needs have enabled the library to break the barriers that hindered this group of students from accessing electronic resources. There has been a significant increase in library usage by students with special needs after the acquisition of the assistive technologies.



Figure 5: DRC Library

Conclusion

The successes by the University of Zimbabwe Library in establishing innovative ICT driven services through partnerships with other institutions shows that libraries can still thrive in the face of difficult economic conditions. Academic libraries therefore need to adapt to changes in information and communication technology and incorporate new services into the library in order to keep pace with the changing demands of library users.

Partnerships provide academic libraries with opportunities to create new means of accessing information to library users through the use of new technologies. Working with partners, the library managed to broaden access to information through various means. In addition this enabled the library to provide information to previously marginalised users like students with special users.

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