
Satellite Meeting - Knowledge Management Section

New Directions in Knowledge Management

The role of librarians in Knowledge Management (KM): An exploratory study of academic libraries for public/ state owned colleges in Swaziland

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Abstract:

Swaziland, being one of the developing countries, has a vision of attaining first world status by 2022 (Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, 2013). In driving this vision, one of the country's mandate is upgrading tertiary institutions, including three (3) of its oldest public/ state owned colleges (Ngwane Teachers Training College, William Pitcher Teachers Training College and Swaziland College of Technology) into university status. Therefore, librarians in these colleges need to develop their roles. In order for these to be achieved, they need to enhance Knowledge Management (KM) practices.

The aim of this study was to investigate the librarians' role in preparedness for the university status in terms of KM. It sought to identify the perceptions of the librarians concerning KM; it further sought to explore its practices and activities in these academic/ college libraries; it sought to discover the benefits of KM practices in these academic libraries; moreover, it sought to investigate the skills and competences needed for proper implementation of KM activities and determine the degree of involvement of academic librarians in KM sharing. In addition, the challenges encountered by the librarians in implementing KM were identified. Findings indicated that librarians understand the concept of KM. It has even been realised that they possess minimal skills and competences needed for proper implementation of the KM activities. The identified challenges that these librarians encounter include not having KM policies in place, lack of funds which results in some knowledge sharing practices not being implemented especially because these libraries are not automated. It also transpired that there is a strong need for academic librarians to be equipped on KM skills. Finally, the study recommends a need for further research in this field, especially on aligning KM with the demands of upgraded academic libraries.

Keywords: Swaziland, Librarians, Academic libraries, Knowledge management

Introduction

In this knowledge era, all areas of life including in academic libraries, Knowledge Management (KM) is a reality in order to be productive and it is a means to gain and sustain a competitive edge over rivals (Priti, 2007). The success of academic libraries depends on

their ability to utilise information and knowledge of its internal and external staff to better serve the needs of the academic community. As noted by Roknuzzaman & Umemoto, 2009 in (Priti, 2007) knowledge management is a viable means in which academic libraries could improve their services.

Background information

Swaziland

This is the smallest landlocked country in Africa based in the Southern part of the continent and covering an area of 6,704 square miles, (17,363 square km) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, inc., 1992). The Kingdom of Swaziland as it is officially known, on its three sides, it is surrounded by the Republic of South Africa and the other side surrounded by the Republic of Mozambique (Encyclopaedia Britannica, inc., 1992)

Figure 1: Map of Southern Africa (SADAC countries)



Source: <http://maps-africa.blogspot.com/2012/05/southern-africa-map-pictures.html>

The Southern Africa map in Figure 1 above indicates the location of Swaziland as part of the fifteen (15) Southern African Development Community (SADC) membership countries and it shows how small the country is compared to other countries.

Figure 2: Map of Swaziland



Source: http://www.swazilandhappenings.co.za/swaziland_maps.htm

Figure 2 above is the map of Swaziland showing the country's regions. Swaziland is divided into four (4) regions Hhohho, Lubombo, Manzini and Shiselweni and the public/state owned colleges are located in three of these regions.

Small as this country is, it has a vision 2022 to see itself counted amongst developed countries (Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, 2013). The vision states that "By the Year 2022, the Kingdom of Swaziland will be in the top 10% of the medium human development group of countries founded on sustainable economic development, social justice and political stability" (The National Development Strategy (NDS), 2013)

In driving this vision, there are numerous endeavours towards preparations and readiness to achieve the first world status. Among other things, there is upgrading of institutions including three (3) of the country's public /state owned colleges namely Ngwane Teachers Training College (NTC), William Pitcher Teachers College (WPC) and Swaziland College of Technology (SCOT). Speaking at WPC 27th May 2010 where he addressed the lecturers on the directive that was going to be implemented, the Minister of Education Dr. Phineas Magagula mentioned that "We have been given a mandate that this college is upgraded alongside Ngwane Teacher's College and SCOT into state universities" (Nkabinde, 2015).

Swaziland's public / state owned colleges

The preparations to upgrade the three public / state owned colleges into a university status started almost a decade ago. Addressing the WPC lecturers, the Minister of Education and Training Dr. Phineas Magagula stated that "After I was appointed as the minister of education and training, the integration of the colleges to be a UNISWA wing was part of the things I found in office. When I did my research on the matter I found that the issue was six (6) years old, and I also started to work on it aggressively along with the ministry officials as things there are done collectively" (Nkabinde, 2015).

During the Swaziland College of Technology (SCOT) 11th Graduation Ceremony, the Minister of Education and Training, Wilson Ntshangase through the Vice Chancellor of the

University of Swaziland stated that *"Government is working very hard to see SCOT being upgraded to a university so that SCOT will continue to offer certificates, diplomas and in addition degree courses"*. He added that *"Technologist programmes will be in place before 2022 in order to fulfil His Majesty the King's vision in seeing Swaziland assume a First World status,"* Ndlela (2010).

SCOT is the oldest public/ state owned college that started as Trade School and was established in 1946 (Swaziland College of Technology, 2016). The William Pitcher College was established in 1962 (Ministry of Education and Training, 2017). While the latest established college was the Ngwane Teacher's College that was established in 1982 as a government institution under the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education and Training, 2017).

Knowledge management (KM) concept

The knowledge creation, acquisition, packaging and application process is referred to as knowledge management (Raja, et al. 2009). For a successful process, the KM steps that need to be followed include: knowledge collection; organization; data protection and presentation and dissemination of knowledge information (Raja, et al. 2009). According to White (2004) cited in Nazim & Mukherjee (2012) KM is "a process of creating, storing, sharing and re-using organizational knowledge (know-how) to enable an organization to achieve its goals and objectives".

Although the KM concept is relatively new and initially popularised among the business world during the past two (2) decades, its applications have now been adopted to other organizations (Lee, 2005, Nazim & Mukherjee, 2012) including academic libraries. Hence, academic libraries need to apply KM in order to prove their relevance and value to their parent organizations.

Academic libraries and Knowledge Management

According to (Raja, et al. 2009) "academic libraries are information centres established in support of the mission of their parent institutions to generate knowledge". For best practices and service delivery, academic libraries need to apply KM. In the Nazim & Mukherjee, 2012 (Gandhi, 2004; Pantry and Griffiths, 2003; Rowley, 1999; Singh, 2007) mentioned that "Academic libraries have now significantly developed and are applying some knowledge management (KM) principles in the provision of library services".

Librarians and Knowledge Management

The key role of librarians is to collect, process, disseminate, store and utilize information to enable multi-disciplinary services of the library users. Raja, et al. (2009) stated that the successful implementation of KM require librarians' substantial contributions since they are information disseminators.

Benefits of KM in academic libraries

Implementing KM in academic libraries therefore ensures an all-round improvement of library staff's capacity; promotion of relationships between libraries and library users; it promotes knowledge innovation, strengthening knowledge inter-networking and quickens knowledge flow (Asogwa, 2012). Nowadays, the knowledge based society has received Knowledge Management in a considerable manner and gave attention in the library and information community. Hence, libraries have applied knowledge management principles to provide effective library services and user satisfaction.

Problem statement

For the public /state owned colleges namely, the Swaziland College of Technology (SCOT), William Pitcher College and Ngwane Teacher's College to qualify and rated to be at university status, their academic libraries / information centres need to operate at the same level of other universities status. Therefore, librarians in these academic libraries need to develop their roles in terms of KM in order to effectively contribute and satisfy the needs of the diverse academic community based in these colleges. However, librarians in these three public / state owned colleges lack the readiness to take on this very important task which will lead to quality assurance challenges if not addressed before the transition is effected. This paper aims at interrogating the concept of KM and demonstrates the need for librarians to be well informed about KM processes and implementation. The librarians need to consciously recognise the importance of KM.

Objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of the three public /state owned College librarians in Swaziland concerning Knowledge Management (KM) concept and to explore their KM practices. To meet this purpose, the objectives of the study are;

- To investigate the librarians' perceptions about knowledge management concept;
- To determine reasons for providing KM activities, this can enable the academic librarians to appropriately practice KM;
- To investigate the KM activities in this academic libraries;
- To identify the skills and competences required by academic librarians in order to be fully engaged in KM activities;
- To determine the sources of KM sharing of the academic librarians;
- To discover the kind of challenges faced by the academic librarians in quest of KM implementation.

Research methodology

The research design was a mixed approach of qualitative and quantitative methods, using predominantly qualitative methods. The qualitative approach allowed the close interaction with participants through telephone interviews and the quantitative approach had the advantage of capturing relevant quantitative information during the course of the study. Data was analysed using content analysis of transcribed data from interviews and descriptive statistics. The study population included a total number of six (6) librarians with their assistants from the three public /state owned college libraries. A purposive sampling was used to select six (6) participants which were four (3) librarians and three (3) assistant librarians from the three public academic libraries, who are supposed to be engaged in KM. Six (6) questionnaires were emailed to participants, however one (1) participant didn't return response and ended up with five (5) participants. In addition, telephone interviews were conducted to solicit follow up information observed as gaps from the initial questionnaire.

Findings

The study participants were a total of six (6), however one participant did not return the questionnaire, therefore the analysis is from five (5) participants. In this section, the findings are presented as follows:

1. Perception about Knowledge Management concept

Table 1. Participants' KM perception

Knowledge management is the process of capturing, distributing and effectively using knowledge to meet organisational goals.
Creating and preserving new knowledge in order to keep abreast with new technologies.
In short create, organise and share knowledge.
Knowledge Management is a method to simplify and improve the process of creating, sharing, distributing, capturing and understanding knowledge in an organisation.
Knowledge management is the process of capturing, distributing and effectively using knowledge to meet organisational goals.

2. Reasons for Practising Knowledge Management

Table 2. KM Reasons

Knowledge Management reasons	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
To achieve the library goals efficiently	100%	0%	0%
To create new knowledge.	100%	0%	0%
To enabling knowledge sharing	100%	0%	0%
To enables me to accomplish tasks quickly	100%	0%	0%
To improve my job performance	100%	0%	0%
To enables me to react more quickly to change	100%	0%	0%
To improves library services	100%	0%	0%
To improves library productivity	100%	0%	0%
To produce more with less due to dwindling library budget	100%	0%	0%
To help leverage existing knowledge	100%	0%	0%
To help manage information explosion	100%	0%	0%
To help establish best practices	100%	0%	0%
To avoid duplication of efforts	100%	0%	0%

3. Knowledge Management Activities

Table 3. KM Activities

Knowledge Management activities	Yes	No
Facilitates strong culture of knowledge sharing	100%	0%
Focus on identifying personal expertise	100%	0%
Creation of a system to capture the tacit knowledge of employees.	100%	0%
Availability of knowledge enabling technology	100%	0%
Survey of knowledge within the library	100%	0%
Activities that focus on creativity and innovation	100%	0%
Written knowledge management policy	100%	0%
Strong partnership between the Library and institutions departments	100%	0%
Strong partnership with other local libraries	100%	0%
Strong partnership with international Libraries and library institutions	100%	0%
Established knowledge repository	100%	0%

4. Knowledge Management Skills

Table 4. KM Skills required

Knowledge Management Skills	Agree	Disagree
Formal Training in KM	80%	20%
Skills for fostering good learning environment	100%	0%
Skills for creating openness and trust	100%	0%
Team working skills.	100%	0%
Interpersonal & communication skills	100%	0%
Skills for creating staff supportive environment	100%	0%
Listening/ dialoguing skills	100%	0%
Skills for fostering creativity and new ideas	100%	0%

5. Knowledge Management Sharing

Table 5. Sources of KM sharing

Sources of KM sharing	Very often	Often	Neutral
Consult with colleagues in my department	60%	40%	0%
Consult with my divisional supervisor	20%	80%	0%
Make use of documented procedures within the library	100%	0%	0%
Consult with other departments within library	20%	80%	0%
Consult with colleagues from other academic libraries	20%	80%	0%
Use other library resources such as (Books, Reference Materials, Databases, etc)	80%	20%	0%
Consult academic professionals from departments within the college	40%	60%	0%
Use the internet social networks and professionals dissection groups	40%	60%	0%

6. Knowledge Management Challenges

Table 6. KM challenges

Knowledge management challenges	Agree	Disagree
Colleagues do not seem to perceive that there is an urgent need to share knowledge	60%	40%
I do not see an urgent need to share information	0%	100%
Lack of sharing knowledge environment	100%	0%
There is no proper organizational sharing knowledge policy	100%	0%
There is no proper IT platform to share information	60%	40%
Lack of procedure to facilitate other people's knowledge needs	80%	20%
Lack of guidelines to support the sharing of knowledge	100%	0%
Constant budget decline	100%	0%
Lack of incentives	80%	20%
Inadequate staff training	100%	0%
Limited expertise in KM	100%	0%
To track the materials from departments is time consuming	80%	20%

Discussion

The study findings are discussed in this section according to the five (5) objectives which have been translated into thematic areas.

1. Perception about Knowledge Management concept

The study sought to investigate the participants' perceptions about the knowledge management concept. They were expected to indicate if they understand the concept by giving a **Yes or No** answer. All participants indicated "yes" meaning that they do understand

the KM concept. In a similar study by Hamid & Nayan (2005) on Knowledge Management in academic libraries, it revealed that “80.8% of the respondents understand the KM concept very clear or clear to some extent”, which means librarians, are familiar with KM concept.

For a **yes** answer, participants were expected to then elaborate their understanding of the concept. Although the participants’ responses were “YES”, they were expected to give their general understanding about KM but they presented definitions of KM without even citations, in Table 1. However, the researcher discovered that 40% of the participants gave same definition from Girard, J.P., & Girard, J.L. (2015). Another 20% used a definition by Karlsen, J. T. and Gottschalk, P. (2004) which creates the impression that some librarians may lack the day to day working knowledge of the idea. Only 40% provided their general understanding of the concept. In a case study by Mostofa & Mezbah-ul-Uslam (2015) it indicates that “the majority of the participants seemed to understand the concept of KM, and the KM concept was well defined by the participants”.

2. Reasons for Practising Knowledge Management

The study further sought to determine the reasons for KM practices implementation by the academic librarians, what can be achieved or what their academic libraries can gain if they implement KM. Several options were given and they were expected to indicate whether they “**Agree**” or “**Disagree**” or “**Neutral**”. Although the question was interested in knowing, what exactly the reasons for the KM implementation are, it was also another way to find out if the participants really understand the good part of the KM practice. To agree with the listed reasons meant to support the statement, to disagree meant to be against it and neutral meant not understanding what can be gained at all.

Reasons determined are as follows: to achieve the library goals efficiently, to create new knowledge, enabling knowledge sharing & transfer, enables me to accomplish tasks quickly, improve my job performance, enables me to react more quickly to change, speeds up the process of decision making, improves library services, improves library productivity, produce more with less due to dwindling library budget, help leverage existing knowledge, help manage information explosion.

All the participants (100%), as indicated in Table 2 agreed with all the reasons listed above. None of them disagreed which shows that they all realise the need and importance of KM.

In the study by Jain (2012), the study reveals that the reasons for practicing KM are mostly as presented above in this study. Notably, “to improve library services was identified as one of the most important reason to initiate KM by the entire participant (100%)”. The results of a study carried out by Arif & Alsuraihi (2012) on the KM practices in academic libraries shows that a good number of “86.9% of respondents on average agreeing on all statements provided (which are also all of the above) indicate that academic librarians do not just understand the KM concept but also understand that implementing KM practices at the library can help them”. In a research by Mostofa & Mezbah-ul-Uslam (2015) the results revealed that “the largest group of library professionals” shows that “improving library services and managing information explosion are the reasons for practising KM in the Library”.

3. Knowledge Management Activities

The study moreover, sought to investigate the kind of activities that are being practised in these institutions in order to enhance KM. The participants were expected to indicate if the activities were being practiced with a **Yes** or **No** if the activities are not practiced.

The participants' response on the activities being practiced as indicated in Table 3 revealed that all the participants (100%) indicated that the above presented activities are being practiced in these public/ state owned academic libraries. The researcher discovered that this part of the study needs to be probed further to discover some of the gaps left by the question and had to call the participants (telephone interview) for elaboration and clarification. The follow up question solicited information on "how the participants in their daily routine practice KM activities?". The responses revealed that although the KM activities are known by the academic librarians, they are hardly practised in the libraries.

The results show that the participants are not implementing not even one KM activities at all, which is not a good because when you look at Table 1 they know the KM concept and in Table 2 they indicated that they know and realise the reasons for implementing of the KM in the academic libraries.

This proves that the study by Jain (2012 title "*An Empirical Study of Knowledge Management in University Libraries in SADC Countries*") was accurate because it only included countries that practice KM and Swaziland was not among the sampled SADAC countries. Among the 15 SADAC countries only 12 libraries participated in the study and only 8 (67%) claimed to be practising KM. These libraries are from the following SADAC countries, Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe (Jain, 2012).

4. Knowledge Management Skills

In order to implement KM effectively & efficiently academic librarians need to apply some certain skills. The participants were therefore, expected to indicate whether they agree that they realise that it's a required skill or disagree if they feel that the KM skills are not necessary or not required skills as reflected in Table 4. All the participants agreed with most of the skills are needed except 20% who indicated that formal training is not required in KM skills. A similar study conducted by Arif & Alsuraihi (2012) revealed that majority of the "academic librarians are in need of skills and competences that could help them in engaging in KM activities". Librarians need skills to be innovative in collecting and disseminating information, as well as packaging information that come in different formats, particularly where there is scarcity of resources and budgets are shrinking to purchase new stock. They also need to work in collaboration with academics that are researchers and sources of teaching and research materials which are not deposited with the libraries. All this requires a proactive approach of the academic librarians.

For the purpose of this study a follow up (telephone interview) was made to further probe information. The study sought to identify the kind of skills the participants need most. Responses indicated that as much as they realise the KM skills, all the participants feel formal training in KM skills can help them. This means that they lack the KM skills because they understand the KM concept as indicated in table 1.

A study carried out by Arif & Alsuraihi (2012) the academic librarians showed that they need the skills and competences to assist them to be engaged in KM activities.

5. Knowledge Management Sharing

The study sought to determine the participants' sharing methods. The participants were expected to indicate the sharing methods they use in order to accomplish their specific task. It was supposed to be either very often, often or not often.

The researcher realised a gap and a follow up question was made to discover if the academic libraries were automated because in Table 5 all the 100% respondents indicated that they "make use of documented procedures within the library" as a sharing method. It was discovered that their libraries are not automated which is another reason the KM sharing is not implemented in these academic libraries. Arif & Alsuraihi (2012) found the need to consider the acquisition of knowledge management system in order to enhance proper implementation of KM sharing.

6. Knowledge Management Challenges

There are numerous challenges that the academic libraries usually face in quest to implement KM. The participants in this study were expected to Agree with listed challenges or Disagree if the challenge is not the reason that affects implementing KM. The challenges had various responses as indicated in Table 6. However, all the participants agreed with the challenges of "lack of sharing knowledge environment", "there is no proper organizational sharing knowledge policy", "lack of guidelines to support the sharing of knowledge", "constant budget decline", "inadequate staff training", "limited expertise in KM" which means these challenges needs urgent attention. The participants realise the lack of skills that has been observed in Table 4 and it affects the implementation of KM.

All the participants disagreed with the challenge that "I do not see an urgent need to share information, which means they realise the importance of sharing information.

Mostofa & Mezbah-ul-Uslam (2015) mentioned that in related literature reviewed indicates that there are many challenges for library professionals in implementing KM in academic libraries. The study emphasise that "the major challenges are lack of skills and competences". A study by Jain (2012) on the SADAC countries "constants budget decline" was indicated as the major one with 92% of the participants.

Conclusion

Considering the findings and the discussion of the study, it is realised that as much as the participants' perceptions indicate that they understand the KM concept they need training and expertise in order implement KM in their academic libraries. As it is indicated, the participants show that the presented KM activities are all required in their academic libraries. The participants proved to be conducting KM sharing manual because they all indicate that they "make use of documented procedures within the library". Automation of the academic libraries can be the best way to influence implementation of KM. The identified challenges that these librarians encounter while implementing these KM practices include not having KM policies in place, lack of funds which results in some knowledge sharing practices not being implemented especially because these libraries are not automated. It also transpired that there is a strong need for assistant librarians to be equipped on KM skills. The study recommends a need for further research in this field, especially on aligning knowledge management with the demands of upgraded academic libraries.

Recommendation

The study recommends a need for further research in this field, especially on aligning KM with the demands of upgraded academic libraries

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