

READER SERVICES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECH- NOLOGY LIBRARY, KUMASI, GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the state-of-the-art of reader services at the U.S.T. Library.

The main sections of the Library that are readily identified with reader services work are the circulation, the reference and the periodical units. It is at these points that various services such as circulation, reference and information, library instruction and other auxiliary services are provided.

Keywords: Reader services, University Libraries, University of Science and Technology Library, Kumasi, Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Reader services in this context denote those services offered directly to users of the University of Science and Technology Library (U.S.T. Library), and include the promotion of and assistance to reading, study and research. These services are rendered by the Reader Services Department of the library. It is not easy to explain what a reader services department is. However, it represents the library and the calibre of work done therein. [1] The work done here are many and varied. These may be grouped under the following broad headings: lending, reference and information, library instruction and what may be termed auxiliaries. These services facilitate the use of bibliographic materials.

Being the first point of contact and as the link between readers and the library, it is imperative that the entire staff of the reader services department present a good impression of the library and never allow themselves to be found wanting. Much of the success of the department depends on the Reader Services Librarian, and therefore, it behoves on him

and his Assistants in the performance of their invaluable and onerous duties to present a pleasing, cheerful and pleasant personality both in manners and in dress, competence and excellent knowledge of what obtains in any section of the library at any given time, and also be capable of giving clear cut directions as to where locations are.

There is no doubt that the U.S.T. Library is a bewildering place, particularly, to those who encounter it for the first time, and these may not see the value of the library by the number of volumes it holds, but by what happens to them inside it. The challenges to their services is therefore not necessarily and solely measured by the number of books the library holds, but most importantly by how widely books are circulated among the user community, and the number of new readers that are attracted. It is therefore the efficiency, competence and presentation with which the Reader Services Librarian approaches his duties that will inspire, deter or repel or even destroy the confidence of both his team of Assistants and users. It is expected of him to be an open and able administrator, sensitive and sympathetic to each and every problem that arises in the library. Likewise, his working principle should be to promote and improve services to authorised users of the library, capably execute and maintain services and allied responsibilities at a high level, and talk knowledgeably to all and sundry. Since the department is the home of students, academics and scholars, the Reader Services Librarian is expected to exhibit a mature and full understanding of the problems of scholarship and research and a good and sound knowledge of objectives, procedures and prerequisites of higher education. It is therefore a challenge to him to possess an extensive and deep knowledge of the profession in general and be capable of applying this expertise to the administration of the library.

The main sections of the U.S.T. Library that are readily identified with reader services work are the Circulation or Issue Desk, the Reference or Inquiry Desk and the Periodicals Section. It is at these service points that various services such as lending, reference and information, orientation/user instruction and other auxiliary services are provided.

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It must however be pointed out that work done at the various service points do not pretend to measure up to the required standards. Be that as it may, the U.S.T. Library only endeavours to get closer to these enviable standards in its own small way.

LENDING

This is primarily the function of the circulation system which is concerned with the control of the flow and movement of library materials. That is, it facilitates physical access of library materials and encourages the optimum use of the library for all purposes of the university. In this direction the lending library takes full responsibility for the physical custody of the books, their accurate arrangement on the shelves in accordance with the library's classification system and ensures their return to the shelves after use by readers. It also operates a system of loan and returns in line with established rules and regulations. Thus basically, it makes materials accessible and available for use by all members of the university community.

The bulk of circulation service is rendered by personnel at the circulation desk situated at the main entrance. Much of the work done here is of routine and preliminary nature. The desk also serves as a control point for the temporary storage of personal effects such as (umbrellas, handbags, cameras, etc) of library users. The personnel at the Issue Desk almost always come into contact with all who use the library, and therefore it is essential and pertinent that they remain well informed about the library's collections and capacities, and also remain courteous and helpful to library users.

Antecedent to borrowing, readers have to be registered in order to become *bona fide* borrowers and this is done at the Issue Desk. Assistants at the Issue Desk take responsibility for the charging and discharging of books and related materials. Issue Desk Assistants search the stacks for reserve requests and give notification when items requested are available. They keep and maintain all records pertaining to registration and statistics of readers and of loans. In doing so, the Issue Desk is able to prune down much of the preliminary searching involved in handling enquiries from readers.

The head of the unit personally handles the library's inter-library loan system with the two sister university libraries at Legon and Cape Coast, and with the Central Reference Research Library of the Council for Scientific and Industry Research (C.S.I.R); Food Research Institute Library; Crops Research Institute Library; et cetera. He puts up all notices concerning the library's working schedules, locations and any changes that may occur from time to time. He also compiles the Library Guide and brings it up to date. He plans and programmes the

library's yearly user instruction programme.

REFERENCE AND INFORMATION SERVICE

Reference and information service may be considered to be any activity related to the provision of information as well as guidance and instruction in the use of library resources. At the U.S.T. Library, these services with the exception of user instruction are offered by the reference unit of the reader services department.

The Reference and Information Desk is manned by an Assistant Librarian (Reference Librarian) and his Assistants who take full responsibility for the service. The Reference and Information Desk is situated on the second floor. The volume of work that goes on here is much esteemed that people often tend to think that it renders the highest form of library service. The Reference Librarian serves as the intermediary between readers and the books in the unit. All queries including those not readily disposed of at the Circulation Desk are lodged with the Reference Librarian. He is a person who deals with readers directly. He provides library users both information and materials which covers a wide range of subjects.

In this library, the Reference Librarian's desk which serves as inquiry desk answers all reference enquiries, both factual and referral.

These include:

"locating in the catalogue an item for which a reader has searched unsuccessfully, or confirming that the item is not in stock; showing a reader how to find from the... catalogue what books the library has on a particular topic; taking a reader to the various printed indexes through which a particular periodical article can be traced; telling a reader which work of reference should be consulted to discovering a certain piece of information [2].

The periodicals section takes care of the acquisition and management of periodicals for the library. Periodicals collection in this library may be categorised into two types. Those that provide general information and those that provide specialised information. Though both have always remained a useful source of information, the latter's contribution to scholarship is immeasurable. Its articles are indepth, concise and accurate and are therefore regularly read by scholars and researchers. It serves as an indispensable link between researchers involved in scholarly work and readers of research findings.

The periodicals section displays these journals for use by readers, and when the issues for the year are received they prepare them for binding. The section also performs other essential functions which

include the answering of readers enquiries, and a personalised service which takes the form of assistance to readers to locate and retrieve journals from the shelves.

One useful indirect service in the form of external photocopy requests is handled by the Deputy Librarian. This perhaps explains the importance the library attaches to this service.

The library also provides photo-xerox or verifax copies of periodical articles and books for research staff, lecturers, students and departments at subsidized rates. When notified by lecturers in advance, of their assignments in periodical literature, the library reproduces multiple copies of periodical articles and place them on 'Students reserve' for the use of the largest possible number of students.

The library offers some basic current awareness services as a means of informing its readers about latest developments in their fields of specialisation. Firstly, the library displays newly processed books ready for the shelves for sometime before moving them to their places on the shelves. Secondly, it lists in a classified order all newly processed materials recently added to the stock in its bulletin 'SELECT RECENT ACQUISITION' - which it sends quarterly to the various departments.

PROBLEMS

Reader services at the U.S.T. Library face problems akin to libraries of its kind in the developing world. The first problem is the absence of union catalogue of books, dissertations and periodicals that link the U.S.T. with the two other Universities in the country. This often results in unnecessary duplication of researches, and waste of efforts, time and energy.

There is the problem of weak collection comprising many outdated books and incomplete sets of journal holdings.

One other problem is the inadequate level of funding for the acquisition of current books and journals.

Exchange control is another stumbling block. Until quite recently, orders from abroad were much delayed, sometimes not honoured.

Poor communication system is another handicap. There is often a break down in our telecommunication network which makes it increasingly difficult to contact university libraries at Legon and Cape Coast. Above all, it is incredibly difficult to contact readers by telephone on the U.S.T. Campus due to frequent dislocation in the local network. With its frequent breakdown and power failure, the library's telex facility is increasingly becoming less reliable. These problems reduce the import and impact of reader services at the U.S.T. Library.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, these are some of the main problems reader services at this library face. There is no doubt that the task is great and onerous but the resources at the disposal of the Library are inadequate. To a very large extent the level of reader services is commensurable with the level of resources at the disposal of the U.S.T. Library. This is in agreement with Nick Moore's Statement, that,

"...the level of resources available to the library service ultimately determines the potential level of performance which can be expected of that service.[3]

This is an incontrovertible observation, in that,

"...it is unreasonable to expect to achieve a high level of performance if only minimal levels of resources are provided for the purpose." [4]

References

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