

OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLE? USERS' PERCEPTION OF THE LIBRARIAN IN CONTEMPORARY INFORMATION ERA

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Abstract *Though academic libraries are pillars to effective implementation of academic programmes, librarians seem not to receive the recognition that befit them from some users, due to misconceptions about their academic status, knowledge and expertise. Meanwhile, these misconceptions, if not corrected, could affect the decision of users to seek for assistance and as a result prevent them from the right information. This makes it imperative to assess the perception library users of the University of Cape Coast have of librarians in the contemporary information dispensation. Through the Descriptive Research Design 171 respondents were engaged in a questionnaire analyzed using the IBM SPSS v21. The results reveal that even though a greater proportion of respondents are aware of librarianship as a profession, they lack understanding of what the profession entails and how it compares with other professions. Also, much as respondents understand the roles of librarians as information experts, they believe that librarians' level of training does not match up to the current information dispensation. As such, a majority of respondents suggests that they would rather rely on friends than seek the services of a librarian to address an information need. It is therefore incumbent on information professionals to be innovative, assertive and dedicated to the tenets of the profession. Also, managers of libraries should institute user-centred/demand driven innovations; whilst the Ghana Library Association should work concertedly to improve the image of the profession and build the capacity of professionals by way of in-service training, seminars, conferences and workshops.*

Keywords: *Librarianship, Information Professionals, Contemporary Information Era*

INTRODUCTION

The world is experiencing evolution where information is key in fulfillment of every aspect of life. The advent of technologies has compelled many professionals around the globe to tune into the changes to improve standards and remain relevant. Librarians keep familiarizing themselves with the emerging developments around the world of information service delivery so as to meet the expectations of users. The growing quantities of information resources on the internet and other platforms have therefore embed librarians with more roles to determine rightful sources of information for users. Users have become more sophisticated and impatient in their information demands which have compelled librarians to abreast themselves in meeting these desires.

In the past, the roles of librarians were limited to the confines of the library building where they were seen as custodians of information. Library collections were mostly found in print form, and information seekers had less option than to

visit the librarian in order to meet their information needs (Townley, 2001; Butler 2000; Corral, 1999). Thus, users who could not access the facilities of a particular library, due to geographical locations, time and other limitations, were largely deprived of the right information. Currently, the landscape of information delivery has seen tremendous improvement due to technology, where information is in abundance with fewer barriers than before (Abdulsalami, Okezie & Agbo, 2013; Oyelude & Bamigbola, 2012).

Librarians are passionate and have developed different lens of taking advantage of the fast-growing technologies to provide quality service. They have employed wider platforms such as social media to connect to users, share information, provide answers to queries, and learn more from users to determine their level of information expectations and to improve information service delivery. The roles of librarians have become very relevant especially in the information age where the credibility of some information resources is questionable. These notwithstanding, librarians seem to be gaining less recognition in their job of information service

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delivery. This could be attributed to the fact that people have little awareness of the various services and products that librarians offer as well as their new roles following application of emerging technologies towards information service delivery. It again may stem from the fact that the abundance of information at the disposal of users leads to little regard for librarians as information experts. Cullen (2001) revealed that libraries need to pay more attention on meeting user expectations as this could be the major means to survive in this era of technology. Much is expected from information professionals, beside their popular roles of information provision, dissemination and serving the information needs of society. Library and information professionals are teachers and researchers who engage in knowledge impartation and discovery, and contribute to existing knowledge to solve problems from various publications relating to the world of information and other social, economic and scientific issues (Arua, 2011; Polger & Okamoto, 2010; Ivey, 2003; Moran, 1984).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Information is indispensable; so has become the role of librarians as information experts. The change in the landscape of information access has driven librarians to devise complex processes to organize and disseminate information to meet user expectations. Librarians are professionals to the core. They are indispensable in this information and knowledge era. They respond to the critical information needs by ensuring that users have competitive edge for knowledge-base. Information professionals play unique roles in gathering, organizing and coordinating access to the best available information sources for the institutions and organizations as a whole (Abels et al., 2003). Librarians provide information to enhance education, research, improve individual lives, and to aid national development.

Nevertheless, in the higher academic environment, librarians seem not to receive the recognition that befit them from some users, due to misconceptions people have about their academic status, knowledge and expertise. Even though the library and information profession can boast of being one of the oldest in the world since the invention of books, the profession has not enjoyed much lime light in the public scene as other professions, hence very little is known about them (Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2016; Bickley & Corral, 2011; Balling, Henrichsen & Skouvig, 2008). Fagan (2003) revealed that users have less knowledge about the educational background of librarians and the professional details of their job. Most people perceive librarian's job as clerical tasks and therefore they are bunch of people with lower academic grades. For that matter some users such as students and lecturers have less confidence in

them. In an observation in 2006 captured by the Lawrence Journal World, an online portal, Mark Hirschey points out a stunning transformation in the way kids access and use information technology, leading to his conclusion that libraries in the contemporary era are inefficient, limited and obsolete. Even though this view received a good number of counter views or opposition, it represents the thinking of some individuals.

It is estimated that whether such perceptions about the profession are real or apparent, they may have been festered by the attitude of library professionals. It is believed that not much has been done by librarians to earn their reputation. Meanwhile, these misconceptions, in the view of Fagan (2003), if not corrected, could affect the decision of users to seek for assistance and as a result prevent them from the right information. In the spirit of continually meeting the information needs of clients, it has thus become imperative to assess the perception library users of the University of Cape Coast have about librarians in the contemporary information dispensation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is guided by questions such as:

- How do library patrons perceive the library professionals?
- What is the expected and lived experience of patrons about roles of library professionals?
- What could be done to improve the image of librarians as information professionals?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Given the professional context of the study, it is anticipated that the outcome will bring to bear all the issues necessary to project the image of librarians to bring interest and value to the information profession. In addition, the study will boost user confidence in librarians to increase the patronage of library services. Finally, this study would contribute to existing knowledge on the topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Library Service Delivery in Contemporary Era

Technologies form the base line for global expansion and improvement in library services of the current era. Libraries have not entirely sheared off their traditional services, but merged some old services with new patterns to meet the

needs of heterogeneous users. Most academic libraries operate in hybrid form, combining both physical space and collections with virtual library or electronic materials and services. Shrestha (2008) stated that the focus of a library in all times is to provide users with best services and information resources that would aid them to excellence.

The value on libraries in this contemporary era has depreciated. Issues surrounding the survival of libraries have become common topic for deliberation in public domain (Yoo-Seong, 2009). Some people have predicted doom for library operations. In this reaction, librarians are key players to secure the future of libraries. Radical decisions are therefore required for libraries to embrace innovations and improve their current status while sustaining their core values. For instance, libraries have rebranded and fused their core activities such as cataloguing, classification and circulation into innovative systems like KOHA, Sierra, Alexandria and other software, and continue to exploit newest technologies to carry out essential services to provide efficiency in library services.

The rise in university education with large students numbers, along multidisciplinary programmes and changes in teaching and learning patterns as well as new information seeking lifestyles of students have challenged librarians to diversify their services. Covert-Vail and Collard (2012) indicate that libraries need to align and design their services for the full spectrum of users. Librarians play unique roles to ensure provision of quality information and service delivery. Elonye and Uzuegbu, (2013) have observed that librarians are now seen as information brokers in collection development and acquisition of information resources based on clientele requirements. Academic librarians liaise with faculty members to acquire standard information resources. Besides their usual services, university librarians provide teaching and training services to equip users with requisite skills to use information effectively in print and electronic form for academic purposes (Agyekum, Ntiamoah-Sarpong, & Arthur, 2017; Brown & Mokgele, 2017; Tachie-Donkor & Dadzie, 2017).

Librarians have adopted several platforms on the internet to widen their services to their local and remote users. Online chats and email messaging have been largely adopted by librarians to extend their services to category of users to create and develop informal learning and networking opportunities for students to work and learn collaboratively to develop their potentials (Covert-Vail & Collard, 2012). Library customers like to use interactive and self-service features. The rate of adoption to virtual services by libraries has extensively made libraries to interact with varied users on a global scale. Amongst such media include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Easy prozy and blogs. Also, YouTube,

Pinterest, Snapchat, and mobile apps are in use. Arif and Mahmood (2012) discovered that libraries have adopted Web 2.0 technologies. This has enabled libraries to offer twenty-four hour uninterrupted service delivery and access to information resources including full text online resources to users. Okello-Obura and Ssekitto (2015) showed that the massive adoption of Web 2.0 tools has brought new phase to the information environment than before. In recent times, mobile phones are used widely by students in tertiary institutions for research on the internet than they do with laptops, for which reason librarians have also extended library services to adopt mobile apps to meet the needs of students in this direction (Singh & Nikandia, 2017; Vassilakaki, 2014; Chang, 2013; Hahn, 2012).

The use of web tools like Google Drive, Google scholar, ORCID, wikis, blogs, and Research Gates are platforms libraries are using to promote services and research outputs of their users and parent institutions. This has increased collaborative research work and helped to create network of researchers across the globe. These technologies provide unique and powerful information sharing and collaborative features in teaching and learning amongst students, staff and lecturers (Grosseck, 2009). Gilmour and Sapp (2003) revealed that scholarly publication and access have shifted towards electronic services, and academic libraries are propelled to adapt further into newest technologies in order to add value to services that they deliver.

In order to remain relevant in the midst of growing technologies, Heinrichs and Lim (2009) proposed that libraries are supposed to hire expert librarians to provide expanded services to create and disseminate knowledge in the digital age. But it could be argued that librarians are quite exposed to technological changes and are constantly upgrading their knowledge on emerging technologies through consortium and training programmes such as conferences, seminars and workshops as well pursuing higher education. More importantly librarians are very mindful about their survival, their continuous relevance, professional commitment and above all, the ideal ways to attract new patrons. Arant (2012) stated that “the librarian should always be in the process of continuous self-examination, self-definition, and self-assessment because change brought on by technology and other factors will dictate the direction and format for how services should be provided.” Librarians need constant review and evaluation of services they provide at any given point in time for appropriate measures to be taken for improvement.

The escalating trend of technologies is widening the gap between researchers and the physical library use. In the report of the Research Information Network (RIN) and the Research Libraries UK (RLUK) (2011), libraries are

becoming alarmed to their separation from researchers. This has redirected librarians to adopt more innovative means to draw users to library premises and enhance the value of their services. RIN and RLUK (2011) revealed in their report that libraries have dedicated spaces for researchers to provide better study environment for them. Service expansions have been commonly adopted to allow maximum space usage in libraries for user activities. Libraries now have discussion rooms, research commons, nursing/toddler rooms and snack rooms to allow users the comfort to utilize the library to the fullest. A study by Marchionini and Pomerantz (2007) indicated that some academic libraries have adopted to the Barnes & Noble approach, by engaging in the sales of Starbucks lattes and Krispy Kreme doughnuts to students in study areas. In addition, reading rooms with background music have been furnished with couches and plush chairs. This approach is becoming increasingly popular among colleges. Also, libraries provide assistive services such as typing, printing and photocopy services to users.

Most academic libraries have added the concept of digital libraries to meet the ever growing needs of users globally. Ekere et al., (2016) outlined the following reasons as the bases for developing digital libraries:

- To increase access to resources to facilitate new research outputs.
- To offer consistent access, give flexibility, provide enhanced capabilities for analysis and manipulation of information/data and to “save the time of the users”
- To support e-learning and online research.
- To supplement traditional print resources, and integrate multimedia library resources on a common platform.
- To increase productivity, and provide better service to users.
- To make collections accessible to concurrent users.

Clients' Expectations of Information Professionals

The bar of client expectation has presumably risen because of their exposure to sophisticated technologies. These have had influence on the information seeking behavior of users, continued to redefine their information and service needs and compelled librarians to employ new options to provide information and services to meet and even exceed those expectations. Users have become sophisticated and selective in their information quest – they want convenient, fast, reliable, current, and authentic information in the easiest way possible (Bell, 2004).

Managing clients' expectations is important since service quality and satisfaction result from how well the actual service was performed (Ojasalo, 2001). Commitment to client expectations bring professional fulfillment, boost

confidence of clients over services and as well enhance work output and productivity. Librarians/information professionals need to always listen to clients of all levels including understanding those that are not precise of what they want. Kulkarni and Deshpande (2012) indicated that the best means to satisfy library users is to establish a communication channel to have systematic dialogue with them to know their expectations. This builds rapport between users and information professionals.

Customer expectations will continue to evolve, the responsibility then rest on librarians to continue to explore best ways to meet and even go beyond those expectations. The hallmark of information professionals is to provide timely, efficient, and uncompromised services that users can rely upon. Technologies afford librarians the capabilities to offer services that cross limits of user expectations, as user expectations are more related to technologies.

Users sometimes can make outrageous demands of information services thereby putting information professionals at a fix. Ojasalo (2001) was of the view that customer may have unrealistic expectations towards professional services. Bawden and Vilar (2006) indicate that it is unrealistic to meet all user expectations. For that matter, librarians, per their constant interactions and level of experience and knowledge pertaining to user information needs, should provide information without constant reliance on users, as this can partly regulate users from making unrealistic demands. However, unrealistic demands by users could be justifiable since they need to meet their targets. For that matter these should not be ignored totally but managed in to satisfy the needs of such users. Libraries need to have policy guidelines that critically conform to technological trends.

In higher educational settings, users have become increasingly diverse in their information seeking processes. Xia (2003) discovered that the difference in levels of student expectations to library services was as a result of the academic status. He further brought to bear that the academics and postgraduate students expected information from varied resources, and relied on accuracy, currency, ease of use as well as convenience of access to information resources while undergraduate students expected fast, ease of use as well convenient of access. To Pinki (2014), customers now ask questions to demand explanations from service providers over service provisions and determine what they need, unlike the previous generations who were naive to judge service providers. Librarians need to manage user expectations differently, for this can contribute towards providing excellent library services. Users then, are also likely to experience frustrations and disappointments when their information expectations are not well managed by librarians.

The Improvement of quality delivery services are never completed because new service enhancement raises more expectations. Librarians are duty-bound to research into evolution of technologies to support their services. They need to focus on the opportunities that satisfy user expectations. When users get the needed assistance, it makes them become partners in supporting sound professional practice. Librarians need to work hard for libraries to be the source for best information and the “seal of approval” to which users turn.

Ways of Improving the Image of Librarians

Every profession is keen on building and protecting its reputation and making prospects through guiding principles. The status of a profession is determined by its perceived value to society, ethical standards, educational qualifications and the level of professional commitments.

Librarianship is yet to receive much global recognition as compared to other highly valued professions like medicine, law, and engineering (Husain, 2011). This can have effect on the status of library professionals and may dampen their morale towards work as well. Majid and Haider (2008) indicate that users perceive librarians to have low education, limited computer skills, and contribute less to social development. This amount to limited knowledge people have about the details of librarianship. Librarians have made great strides in higher academic and training levels like any other professionals such as lecturers, lawyers and doctors among others. They need to shine the light on themselves to showcase their skills, responsibilities and educational background to gain public trust.

On the issue of career choice, librarianship seems less attractive option. For most people, it is seen as the last resort for career considerations. To Ard et al., (2006), many youth consider librarians to lack the glamour as other profession. This perhaps could be that students have less exposure in career counseling in librarianship. The Australian Library and Information Association (2014) attributed this to the perception that libraries are less relevant in a world with Google without recourse to the fact that not every piece of information on the internet and for that matter Google is worthwhile. As Esey et al (2014) would confirm, now anyone can post all manner of things on the Internet without proper review and evaluation of contents. Librarians need to streamline advocacy to make themselves relevant and competitive like other professions. They can make strong contribution to these by equipping people with requisite skills necessary for them to access quality information and create more robust and interesting environment for users.

Library professionals need to get over any misconception people have about them, try to correct those erroneous

impressions through advocacy on platforms such as blogs, and on social media. Pagowski and Rigby (2014) argued that librarians cannot ignore the stereotype, and not worry about it, but it should be seen as a privilege to explain themselves to people. But Jennings (2016) observed that librarians responding to these negativities could create inferiority complex and would further degrade the decent profession and as a result deter young people from pursuing the profession. Husain (2011) outlined factors that contribute to low image of librarians as;

- The public has little awareness about the work librarians.
- There is ignorance about the budget and personnel involved in library operations.
- People are unaware of the social responsibilities of librarians.
- Librarians are not paid properly.
- Library users cannot differentiate librarians from other staffs.
- Some libraries do not offer quality service.
- Libraries receive little funds from governments.

It therefore behooves on librarians and information professionals to market and rebrand library services to conform to the current dispensation. More capacity training and innovative programmes can be introduced in library schools including workshops, seminars and conferences in order to expose, motivate and build understanding and interest of people towards the library profession. Jennings (2016) noted that information professionals need to educate themselves to the level or above the levels of their users in order to be more valuable to users, gain social recognition, and meet the ever growing information demands of users.

There are still a considerable number of people who still consider librarianship as a career choice. Amongst such reasons are; because of the love for books and reading, the desire to serve people, for intellectual development, easy to get a job and to develop work experience of paraprofessionals (cited in Husain, 2011; Olawanle and Abayomi, 2010; Isa and Nwalo, 2008; Ard et al., 2006; Farley-Larmour, 2000).

Manpower training in the use of newer technologies is another issue that information professional should be concerned with, for this would aid them in the discharge of their duties effectively (Ekere et al., 2016). This would help librarians to promote and expand their services and as well make them relevant.

Collectively, librarians should rebrand themselves to change the image of the profession in the positive way. Husain (2011) noted that efforts from consortia and library associations should intensify publicity programs to create awareness

among the public regarding the role of librarians. Beyond that, librarians must develop their potentials and as well, take advantage of technologies to improve their services and make impact in the society.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Descriptive Research design was adopted for the study. This design is concerned with describing the characteristics of a research problem by finding facts and accurately interpreting them. It is appropriate for this study because it allows for generalizations.

Since this was a facility-based study, the study population included 'active' patrons or users of the Sam Jonah Library. This is to say that, even though all university community members are part of the library's clientele, the study was delimited to people who patronized library services on the day of the data collection. Approximately, not less than 2,000 users patronize the library each day, thus making it the population from which any meaningful sample could be made. A total of 200 people were sampled randomly from the various study floors of the library. In order to secure honest response from the respondents, anonymity and complete confidentiality were ensured.

Questionnaire was the main instrument for data collections. Items on the questionnaire included questions relating to the background of respondents as well as other issues relating to the objectives of the study. It included both open and close-ended items and the use of two point (Aware/Not Aware) and three-point (Agree/Neutral/Disagree) Likert Scales accordingly. Of the two hundred respondents sampled, 171 of the questionnaire were returned and found to be usable for further analysis. These formed the main source of primary data for the study, and were coded and analyzed using the IBM SPSS v21. Results were presented using frequency/percentage tables. Secondary data were gathered from published and unpublished documents and subject-relevant literature in both print and electronic format.

FINDINGS

Background of Respondents

The study engaged 171 students who used the library. Of these, there were more males (69.6%) than females, more undergraduate students (87.7%) than post-graduates, with a majority of the respondents (62.0%) patronizing the library on a daily basis. Nearly a sixth of respondents (57.3%) claimed to be of average IT proficiency, indicating they occasionally needed assistance when undertaking computer-

related tasks. Table 1 displays the background characteristics of respondents.

Table 1: Background Characteristics of Respondents

	Background characteristics	N=171	%
Gender	Male	119	69.6
	Female	52	30.4
Level	Undergraduates	140	81.9
	Post-graduates	31	18.1
Library facility usage	Daily	106	62.0
	Once in a week	52	30.4
	Once in a month	10	5.8
	Once in a semester	3	1.8
Level of ICT Proficiency	Very proficient	68	39.8
	Averagely proficient	98	57.3
	Not proficient	5	3.0

Perception of Users About Library Profession/professionals

Training and qualification of library professionals

The study sought to ascertain how library users perceived the library profession and the people who practice this profession. It measured the level of awareness of these students on certain core facts of the library profession as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Perception About the Training and Qualification of Library Professionals

Statement	Aware	Percent (%)
Librarianship is a profession just like medicine, engineering, law etc.	116	67.8
Librarianship has a body of knowledge and skills-set for its training	55	32.2
A librarian has at least masters level of education	33	19.3
The route to becoming a professional librarian is similar to a lecturer's	52	30.4
Librarians are accorded academic status in the university	43	25.1

It emerged from the study, as shown by Table 2, that about two-thirds of respondents (67.8%) are aware that librarianship is a profession just as medicine, engineering and law are. This notwithstanding, only about a third of

respondents (32.2%) is aware of the fact that the field of librarianship has a body of knowledge and skills-set for one to acquire before practicing as a professional. Laying further credence to this low perception about the profession, less than 20% of respondents are aware of the fact that one needs to possess at least a Master's degree in Information Science before being referred to as a librarian.

Again, Table 2 reveals that only three out of every ten respondents (30.4%) knew that the route or conditions to becoming a librarian in the university are similar to the requirements of becoming a university lecturer. And, as to whether librarians are accorded the same status as lecturers in the university, only a quarter (25.1%) of respondents answered in the affirmative.

Duties of Library Professionals

The study assembled the perceptions library clients had about the duties of library professionals in the academic environment as portrayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Perception about Duties of Library Professionals

Statement	Aware	Percent
A librarian plays a direct role in the information aspects of teaching, learning and research	126	73.7
Librarians are information experts	144	84.2
A librarian is to help me become independent lifelong learner	139	81.3
It is the duty of the librarian to assist me to be information literate	142	83.0

It could be seen from Table 3, that library users engaged in the study had a positive perception regarding the duties library professionals are supposed to play in addressing their information needs. According to nearly three-fourth of respondents (73.7%), a librarian plays a direct role in the information aspects of teaching, learning and research. Again, about four out of every five respondents, respectively, believe that librarians are information experts (84.2%); a librarian's duty is to help a client become independent life-long learner (81.3%) and also, to assist users become information literate (83.0%)

Skills Set of Librarians in Relation to User's Information Needs

The study explored how instrumental library clients considered librarians in their quest to solve their information needs. This was to get the view of respondents emanating from the actual experience they have encountered in receiving services from librarians. In doing this, questions were asked

to figure out whether they believed library professionals had the skills and capacity to aptly help address their information needs as captured in Table 4.

Table 4: Users' Perception of Capacity of Librarians to Help Address their Information Needs

Statement	A	N	D
Due to the abundance of information online, librarians are not so significant now	45.0	11.7	33.3
Librarians here are not on top of their job.	28.1	27.9	45.0
At my level, I can address all my information needs without the help of a librarian	43.2	17.0	39.8
The information needs I have are too complex for a librarian to handle.	12.1	18.1	69.6
The level of training of librarians here do not match this era of information technology	81.3	11.7	7.0
My visits to the library are more about library facilities than a librarian's assistant.	73.7	12.3	14.0
I would rather consult a friend or a colleague to address an information need than a librarian.	60.7	18.8	20.5
The online visibility of our librarians is very poor	52.7	26.9	20.4
The librarian is able to apply modern technologies to assist me address my information needs	39.8	28.7	31.5

NB: A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree

To a statement that 'due to the abundance of information online, librarians are not significant now', only a third (33.3%) of respondents disagreed. It is worthy of note that as many as 45% of respondents agreed to this assertion, with 11.7% of respondents having a neutral stance. Again, whereas about three out of every ten respondents (28.1%) believed that librarians were not on top of their job, 45% of respondents rather disagreed to this assertion.

Table 4 also depicts that 43.5% of respondents were of the view that they could address all their information needs without the help of a librarian. This was as opposed to nearly four out of ten respondents (39.8%) who thought otherwise, with 17% being indifferent.

Also, Table 4 again depicts that a majority of respondents hold the perception that the level of training of librarians does not match up to demands of the current information and communication technology era. This view is held by eight out of every ten respondents (81.3%). This perception is strengthened by the fact that not up to a tenth of the respondents (7.0%) disagreed with such an assertion. In a rather similar fashion, a little above half of respondents

(52.7%) believe that the online visibility of librarians was very poor whilst less than four out of ten respondents (39.8%) supported the view that a librarian is able to apply modern technologies to assist a user address information needs.

Consequently, 60.7% of respondents indicated that they would rather consult their colleague students to address an information need than seek the services of a librarian.

Ways to Make Librarians/Information Professionals More Relevant

A number of suggestions were made by respondents regarding how practitioners of the information profession could become more relevant to the needs of patrons. These, as shown by Table 5, ranged from the need for librarians to be innovative, assertive and dedicated, among others.

Table 5: Ways to Make Librarians More Relevant

Suggestions	Frequency	Percent
Innovativeness	144	90.1
Assertiveness	138	80.7
Dedication	108	63.2
On the job training and workshops	96	56.1
Supervision	70	40.9

A majority of respondents believed that the current generation of library staff needs to be very innovative. This is according to 90.1% of respondents as shown in Table 5. The table also depicts that 138 respondents, representing 80.7% expected librarians to be more assertive in order to position themselves well to serve their clients' needs. Again, more than half of respondents (63.2% and 56.1% respectively) believed a lot more dedication and on-the-job-training or workshops are the ways to go if librarians are to be more relevant in the current information dispensation.

It is however interesting to note that not up to half of the total respondents (40.9%) considered increased or improved supervision of librarians as an antidote to the negative perception held by clients about librarians.

DISCUSSIONS

In the Sam Jonah Library, as pertains in other libraries in Ghana, there is a mix of workforce comprising non-professionals, paraprofessionals and professional librarians, with the former dominating in terms of proportion. From the study, even though library users are aware of librarianship as a profession, they have limited knowledge about the fact that that librarianship training involves a body of knowledge and skills set, and the fact that the minimum requirement for one to become a professional librarian is a Master's Degree

in Library and Information Science. They thus considered everyone who worked in a library building as a librarian. This thinking may have pervaded because in practice, non-professionals are made to execute certain front-end tasks (circulation, reference, enquiries, orientation/user education etc.) directly to patrons and as a result, cause such patrons into believing that every worker in the library is a librarian. Again, the study revealed that a majority of library users do not know that a librarian is pegged at the same level as teaching staff of the university, and that, they are accorded the same status as university lecturers.

In agreement with this study, Hussain (2012) discovered that librarianship is yet to receive much global recognition as compared to other highly valued professions like medicine, law, and engineering. This has effect on the status of library professionals and affects their drive towards work as well. Even though librarians are accomplished scholars, not much is known about them in this important aspect. This amount to limited knowledge people have about the details of librarianship. In a similar vein, Majid and Haider (2008) indicate that users perceive librarians to have low education, limited computer skills, and contribute less to social development. A lot of these factors enumerated confirm the findings of Hussain (2011) in which study a number of the causes ascribed for the low library image had to do with lack of awareness of who a librarian actually is.

In the assessment of Yoo-Seong (2009), the value on libraries in this contemporary era has depreciated, and for this reason, issues surrounding the survival of libraries have become common topic for deliberation in public domain (Yoo-Seong, 2009). These and many other observations are what led Heinrichs and Lim (2009) to propose that libraries are supposed to hire expert librarians to provide expanded services to create and disseminate knowledge in the digital age.

Also, respondents were not oblivious of the supposed roles to be played by librarians and other information professionals, especially in addressing the information needs of clients. In the study, a majority of respondents believes that librarians are information experts whose duties are to directly play a role in teaching; learning and research, in the bid to support patrons become information literate and independent life-long learners. By definition, librarians play unique roles to ensure provision of quality information and service delivery. They are now seen as information brokers, in collection development, acquisition of information resources based on clientele requirements. Academic librarians liaise with faculty members to acquire standard information resources. Besides their usual services, university librarians provide teaching and training services to equip users with requisite

skills to use information effectively in print and electronic form for academic purposes.

This earlier assertion notwithstanding, when it came to the actual experience of library patrons regarding the role of librarians, the narrative was different. Thus, a significant proportion of library patrons considered librarians as not being on top of their job, and so not so significant in this era of information age. To this end, some believed that they could on their own, address all their information needs or rather consult a friend than seek the help of a librarian. These were all summed in the belief that the level of training of librarians does not match up to the complex demands of users in the current information and communication technology era. The Australian Library and Information Association (2014) in a similar study revealed that some users believe that libraries are less relevant in a world with Google. Similarly, the 2011 Report of the Research Information Network (RIN) and the Research Libraries UK (RLUK), observed that libraries are becoming alarmed about their separation from researchers.

Other related studies have revealed that patrons expect to see certain skill in information professionals (Emezie & Nwaohiri, 2013; Saunders, et al, 2015). Technologies form the base line for global expansion and improvement in library services of the current era. Libraries have not entirely sheared off their traditional services, but merged some old services with new patterns to meet the needs of heterogeneous users (Ekere et al, 2016; Hussain, 2011). Most academic libraries operate in hybrid form, combining both physical space and collections with a virtual library of electronic materials and services. For instance, libraries have rebranded and fused their core activities such as cataloguing, classification and circulation into innovative systems like Koha, Alexandria and Sierra Integrated Library Software, and continue to exploit newest technologies to carry out essential services to provide efficiency in library services. Online chats and email messaging have been largely adopted by librarians to extend their services to category of users. However, these changes, and the pace at which they have come, are not commensurate with the speed at which information and telecommunication technology is changing the pattern of information seeking in the contemporary era. To Ojasalo (2001), clients' expectations should be held in high esteem since it is directly proportional to service quality and satisfaction. To this end, Yoo-Seong (2009) observes that librarians are key players to secure the future of libraries because radical decisions are required for libraries to embrace innovations and improve their current status while sustaining their core values. Covert-Vail and Collard (2012) indicate that libraries need to align and design their services for the full spectrum of users.

By way of solution to improve the existing position

libraries occupy in the minds of users, respondents were upbeat by strategies such as innovativeness on the part of information professionals and being assertive as well. The RIN and RLUK, in supporting this stance, posited that the technology-influenced widening gap between researchers and the physical library use has redirected librarians to adopt more innovative means to draw users to library premises and enhance the value of their services. Arif and Mahmood (2012) discovered that some libraries have adopted Web 2.0 technologies to offer twenty-four hour uninterrupted service delivery and access to information resources including full text online to users. Specific mentions have been made of tools such as Google drive, Google Scholar, ORCID, wikis, blogs as platforms with special information sharing and collaborative features in teaching and learning amongs students, Staff and lecturers (Okello-Obura and Ssekitto, 2015; Grosseck, 2009; Gilmour and Sapp, 2003).

To Ard et al., (2006), many youth consider librarians to lack the glamour as other professions. It could be that students have less exposure in career counseling in librarianship. Again, that, training and workshops are effective a strategies to deal with the low perception patrons have about information professionals, is not new to literature. Such suggestions are in agreement with earlier studies where skills upgrade was considered as instrumental in improving the image of information professionals (Husain, 2011; Ard et al., 2006; Farley-Larmour, 2000). It is in support of this view that Arant (2012) stated that "the librarian should always be in the process of continuous self-examination, self-definition, and self-assessment because change brought on by technology and other factors will dictate the direction and format for how services should be provided. Supporting this finding in a similar study, Covert-Vail and Collard (2012) appreciated the need for libraries to adopt informal learning and networking opportunities for clients to learn and work in a collaborative manner. Kulkarni and Deshpande (2012) indicated that customer expectations will continue to evolve, hence the responsibility then rest on librarians to continue to explore best ways to meet and even go beyond those expectations.

In a likewise manner, Hussain (2011) also feels strongly about the need for librarians and information professionals to make library services meet the demands of the contemporary era. In his view, "Librarians need to write juicy proposals for sponsorship packages from donor agencies, corporate bodies and individuals to resource libraries. They need to think creativity and innovation, reinvent opportunities and exploit trending technologies to transform their services and make the profession widely recognized, attractive and lucrative enough for people to pursue". He however contends that such effort will be more meaningful if library associations and consortia could provide the framework, not only to build

the capacity of information professionals but also, “intensify publicity programmes to create awareness among the public regarding the role of librarians” (Hussain, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study affirms the fact that library users find it difficult to segregate the various categories of staff in the library – professionals, para-professionals and non-professionals and thus have low perception about the profession. They again consider it the duty of librarians to address all their information needs and to help them become independent life-long learners. However, library patrons engaged in the study professed that per their experience, library professionals were not able to meet their information needs and therefore not to be relied upon. That is, all interactions with any library employee are seen as one and same irrespective of training or category.

Consequently, the study, in agreement with suggestions from users and literature, recommends that:

- Library employees must constantly upgrade themselves to meet the current demands of information provision. This could be done formally by enrolling in the various information-related degree programmes, or informally through on-the-job training, and Ghana Library Association sanctioned seminars, workshops and conferences.
- Library management should always roll out user-driven or demand-driven innovations which will meet the satisfaction of users.
- Professional librarians must always show the way by being assertive in the discharge of their duties. It is very important for information professionals to project the image of the profession.

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