

**REFERENCE AND INFORMATION SERVICE DELIVERY IN
MICHAEL OKPARA UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE
UMUDIKE AND ABIA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES.**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined reference and information service delivery in public university libraries in Abia State. The objectives were to identify the types of reference and information services provided in public university libraries in Abia State, Identify the challenges faced by librarians in providing reference and information services in public university libraries in Abia State, and propose strategies for improving reference and information service delivery in public university libraries in Abia State. A descriptive survey design was used for the study, seventy (70) librarians from the two university libraries were used for the study. Data were collected through questionnaires and observation checklists, which yielded a 100% response rate. Frequency tables and mean scores were used for analysis. Findings revealed that reference and information services are available in the reference sections of the university libraries under study. However, librarians face several challenges in providing these services. The study also proposed strategies to improve reference and information service delivery in the libraries under study. Recommendations include enhancing user education programs, expanding digital reference services, increasing funding and resource allocation, and providing capacity-building training for librarians. These measures aim to improve the effectiveness of reference and information services in public university libraries in Abia State.

Keywords: Reference services; Information service delivery; Public university libraries; MOUUAU; ABSU

Introduction

University libraries play a critical role in supporting academic institutions by providing access to knowledge, research materials, and various information services. They serve as the backbone of higher education, ensuring that students, faculty, and researchers have access to scholarly resources essential for teaching, learning, and innovation (Kumar & Bhardwaj, 2021). As centers of knowledge dissemination, university libraries offer diverse resources, including books, journals, electronic databases, and multimedia materials, to meet the evolving needs of users.

With advancements in information technology, university libraries have transformed from traditional repositories of printed materials to dynamic digital hubs that offer electronic resources, digital repositories, and online reference services (Smith, Taylor, & Brown, 2020). These libraries employ modern technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and cloud computing to enhance information retrieval and service delivery (Johnson, 2022). Additionally, they play a vital role in fostering information literacy by guiding users on effective research techniques, academic integrity, and proper utilization of resources (Aina, 2019). This could be achieved with the help of a well-equipped and dynamic reference services.

Reference services involve direct interaction between librarians and users, where librarians assist in locating and using information resources effectively (Bopp & Smith, 2021). These services have evolved from traditional face-to-face interactions to digital platforms, enhancing accessibility and efficiency in modern academic libraries (Kumar & Vohra, 2020). The significance of reference and information service delivery lies in its ability to bridge the gap between information seekers and available knowledge. Effective reference services ensure that students, researchers, and faculty members maximize the use of library resources to meet their academic and research needs (Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). As university libraries increasingly integrate digital technologies, there is a growing shift toward virtual reference services, chatbots, and artificial intelligence-assisted research support (Madhusudhan, 2022). This shift highlights the dynamic nature of reference services in adapting to the changing needs of users in the digital Abia State.

Statement of the Problem

University libraries need reference and information services to assist academic research, learning, and teaching by providing relevant and timely information. Such services are anticipated to improve students' and researchers' access to excellent material in public university libraries. Public university libraries in Abia State, notably Michael Okpara university of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUUAU) and Abia State University, Uturu (ABSU), may not be providing enough reference and information services due to insufficient personnel, technology resources, librarian training, digital resource access, and user understanding of available services. The growing use of digital information sources and changing demands of library users need an evaluation of how successfully university libraries react to reference service trends.

To the knowledge of the researchers, there is no study on how well reference and information services satisfy the demands of users in public university libraries in Abia State, despite their

importance in academic assistance. This backdrop makes the research relevant to fill the gap. Thus, this research examines MOUAU and ABSU library reference and information services.

Purpose of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the reference and information service delivery in public university libraries in Abia State. Specifically, the study sought to:

Examine the types of reference and information services provided in public university libraries in Abia State.

Identify the challenges faced by librarians in providing reference and information services.

Ascertain the strategies for improving reference and information service delivery in public university libraries in Abia State.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the types of reference and information services are provided in public university libraries in Abia State?
2. What are the challenges faced by librarians in providing reference and information services?
3. What are the strategies for improving reference and information service delivery in public university libraries in Abia State?

Literature Review

Concept of University Libraries

A university library is an essential component of higher education institutions, established to support academic programmes, research, and the dissemination of knowledge. It serves students, faculty, and researchers by providing access to diverse information resources, both physical and digital. University libraries play a crucial role in facilitating teaching, learning, and innovation by offering scholarly materials, study spaces, and information literacy training (Aina, 2020). According to Ifidon and Ifidon (2019), university libraries are designed to meet the intellectual and research needs of their parent institutions. They differ from other types of libraries by their vast collection of academic books, journals, theses, dissertations, and digital resources. These libraries operate based on well-defined policies that align with the mission and vision of the universities they serve.

University libraries provide a variety of services, including provision of information resources like books, electronic journals, databases, and research materials essential for academic growth (Ogbomo, 2021). University libraries also facilitate research activities by offering access to special collections, digital repositories, and plagiarism detection tools (Ojedokun & Moahi, 2022). It also provides training for students and faculty members to improve their research and information retrieval skills; provision of digital and technological services which offers e-books, open access repositories, and online reference services Ani and Esin (2020), and reference and

information services – Librarians assist users in locating, retrieving, and evaluating information effectively.

University libraries contribute significantly to academic success and institutional development. They promote lifelong learning, support accreditation requirements, and enhance global knowledge exchange (Ekere, Nwachukwu, & Orji, 2021). Additionally, they bridge the digital divide by providing internet access and digital resources to students and researchers who may not have personal access to such materials.

Concept of reference services in the library

Reference services are an essential function of libraries that help users locate, evaluate, and utilize information effectively. These services connect users with the resources they need for academic, professional, or personal purposes. Reference librarians play a crucial role in guiding patrons toward relevant information sources, whether print, electronic, or multimedia. Reference services in libraries are traditionally defined as direct assistance provided by librarians to users in searching for information (Cassell & Hiremath, 2018). These services may include answering inquiries, assisting in research, offering instruction in information literacy, and providing access to digital resources. According to Bopp and Smith (2021), reference services have evolved significantly due to technological advancements, integrating online tools and virtual assistance.

Reference services can be broadly classified into the following types according to Cassel and Hiremath (2018): Ready reference services which involve answering quick and factual questions, often requiring minimal research, Research assistance which involves in-depth help for users conducting detailed studies; Instructional services - focus on teaching users how to navigate library catalogs, databases, and digital resources; Referral Services which is a service carried out when a library cannot meet a user's information needs, it may refer them to another institution, specialist, or external database and Virtual Reference Services, including email, chat, and video consultations, have become common and they expand accessibility and convenience for remote users; Current Awareness Services (CAS) and Selective Dissemination of information (SDI) (Johnson & Browne, 2017).

Despite their importance, reference services face several challenges, including information overload, as users struggle to differentiate between credible and unreliable sources in an era of overwhelming digital content (Cassell & Hiremath, 2018); budget constraints, which limit funding for staffing, technology, and service expansion; technological advancements, requiring libraries to continuously update their tools and train staff to keep up with emerging innovations; and shifting user expectations, as the rise of instant online search tools like Google has changed how people seek information, leading to a decline in the utilization of traditional reference services (Cassell & Hiremath, 2018).

Information Service

Information services in libraries refer to the activities and resources provided by libraries to meet the informational needs of their users. These services are designed to facilitate the efficient acquisition, organization, access, and dissemination of information in various forms, including print, digital, audio-visual, and multimedia formats. Libraries serve as hubs for information,

offering a variety of services that support education, research, recreation, and general knowledge enhancement (Raju & Sahoo, 2017). The significance of information services in libraries is manifold. They support academic and research activities by providing access to specialized materials. They enhance the quality of education by offering tools that facilitate learning and research. Libraries also serve as inclusive spaces that provide equitable access to information for all members of society, regardless of socioeconomic background (Liu & Zhai, 2020).

These services encompass several key components including:

A. Reference Services: Reference services involve assisting library users in locating information, whether it is in physical collections or online databases. Reference librarians are trained to guide users in accessing relevant resources and using information effectively (Hernon & Matthews, 2015).

B. Information Retrieval: This refers to the process of identifying, locating, and acquiring information in response to a user's query. It is closely tied to the use of cataloging systems, indexing tools, and databases, particularly in digital environments where information retrieval has become more sophisticated (Sadeh & Laszlo, 2019).

C. Digital Information Services: With technological advancements, libraries now provide digital information services, which include offering access to e-books, electronic journals, databases, and other digital resources. These services are vital in the digital age, as they allow users to access a vast array of information from anywhere, at any time (Liu & Zhai, 2020).

D. User Education and Training: Information literacy programmes are integral to information services in libraries. They help users develop the skills necessary to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively. Training sessions may focus on navigating library catalogues, utilizing online databases, or understanding copyright laws and ethical considerations in information use (Savolainen, 2018).

E. Information Dissemination: Libraries play a crucial role in distributing information to a broader audience, such as through newsletters, exhibitions, and community outreach programmes. By disseminating information, libraries contribute to public awareness and lifelong learning (Wilson, 2017).

F. Document Delivery Services: These services involve providing users with access to documents or information sources that may not be readily available in the library's collection. Through interlibrary loans or access to electronic resources, libraries ensure users have comprehensive access to necessary information (Breen, 2016).

Challenges and Strategies for Enhancing Reference and Information Services in Public University Libraries

Librarians in public university libraries face numerous challenges in providing reference and information services, which impact their ability to effectively support students, faculty, and researchers. One of the primary challenges is the rapid advancement of technology and the increasing reliance on digital resources. Many librarians struggle to keep up with evolving digital tools, online databases, and information retrieval systems, which can hinder their ability to assist users effectively (Liu & Zhai, 2020). Additionally, limited funding and budget constraints

restrict access to the latest resources, software, and training opportunities, making it difficult to maintain up-to-date collections and services (Breen, 2016).

Another significant challenge is the lack of adequate staffing and professional development. Many university libraries experience a shortage of qualified librarians, leading to work overload and reduced service efficiency (Raju & Sahoo, 2017). Furthermore, many librarians have limited opportunities for continuous professional development, which is essential in adapting to the ever-changing information landscape (Hernon & Matthews, 2015). User-related challenges also exist, as students and faculty may lack the necessary information literacy skills to navigate digital resources effectively. Many users struggle with evaluating and utilizing credible information, placing additional pressure on librarians to provide extensive training and support (Savolainen, 2018).

To improve reference and information service delivery in public university libraries, several strategies can be implemented. First, libraries should invest in continuous professional development programmes to ensure librarians are well-equipped with the latest knowledge and skills in digital literacy and information retrieval (Wilson, 2017). Regular training sessions and workshops on emerging technologies, research databases, and online information management tools can enhance librarians' ability to serve users more efficiently. Second, increasing financial support and securing additional funding can help libraries upgrade their digital resources, expand collections, and improve service infrastructure (Breen, 2016). Seeking external grants and partnerships with academic institutions can also supplement financial limitations.

Furthermore, libraries should implement user-centered services that cater to the specific needs of students and faculty. Providing customized reference services, online chat support, and interactive tutorials can make information access more convenient and efficient (Sadeh & Laszlo, 2019). Strengthening information literacy programmes is also crucial; librarians should collaborate with academic departments to integrate information literacy training into university curriculum, ensuring students acquire essential research skills early in their studies (Savolainen, 2018). Additionally, leveraging emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reference services, and digital knowledge repositories can further enhance information accessibility and user experience (Liu & Zhai, 2020).

Research Methods

The research method adopted for this study is descriptive survey. The sample size of the study is 70 library staff which is made up of 24 professionals and 18 para professionals in Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike and ten (10) professionals and 18 para professionals in Abia State University, Uturu. A structured questionnaire titled "Reference and Information Service delivery in Public University Libraries questionnaire" (RISDPULQ) and a checklist to ascertain the available reference and information services in the libraries studied were used for data collection. The researcher and two research assistants, one from each of the institutions administered the instruments. The study instrument recorded a 100 percent return rate. Data obtained from the study was analyzed using descriptive statistics- mean and standard deviation.

Results

Table 1: shows the total number of questionnaire distributed in the Universities visited. The table shows that out of total of 70 questionnaire administered in both Universities, all 70(100.0%) were successfully returned. Distribution and return by institutions shows that 42 questionnaire went to MOUAU library, 42(100.0%) were successfully returned while in ABSU library 28 questionnaire was distributed and 28(100.0%) returned.

Data Analysis

Research Question 1: What types of reference and information services are provided in Public University Libraries in Abia State?

Table 1: Types of Reference and Information Services Provided in Public University Libraries in Abia State.

		MOUAU library		ABSU library	
SN	Reference and Information services	Available	Not Available	Available	Not Available
1	The library provides directional services (e.g., assistance in locating resources within the library)	√		√	
2	The library offers ready reference services (e.g., quick responses to factual queries using encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc.).	√		√	
3	Research assistance is available for in-depth academic inquiries.	√		√	
4	The library provides bibliographic services (e.g., reading lists, literature searches).		√		√
5	Referral services are available when the library does not have the required resources.	√		√	
6	The library offers Current Awareness Services (CAS) to keep users informed of new publications.	√		√	
7	There is a Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) service tailored to users' specific needs		√		√

8	The library conducts user education programmes to train users on information retrieval.		√		√
9	Interlibrary Loan (ILL) and document delivery services are available for borrowing materials from other libraries		√		√
10	The library provides digital and virtual reference services through online help desks, emails, or chatbots		√		√

The researcher visited the libraries of Michael Okpara University of Agriculture Umudike and Abia State University library Uturu with a 10 item observation checklist to ascertain types of reference and information services that are provided in their University libraries.

From the table above both libraries provide 5 items out of the 10 items which include: provision of directional services, offers ready reference services, Research assistance is available for in-depth academic inquiries, Referral services are available when the library does not have the required resources and offers Current Awareness Services (CAS) to keep users informed of new publications are available, while the other 5 items including: the provision of bibliographic services, Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) service tailored to users' specific needs, conducting user education programs to train users on information retrieval, Interlibrary Loan (ILL) and document delivery services are available for borrowing materials from other libraries and provision of digital and virtual reference services through online help desks, emails, or chatbots are not provided.

Research Question 2: What challenges do librarians face in providing reference and information services?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Challenges Faced by Librarians in Providing Reference and Information Services

S/N	Item Statements	MOUAU		ABSU		Overall Mean		Remark
		$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	
1	Insufficient funding affects the quality of reference services	3.55	0.50	2.71	0.95	3.67	0.50	Accepted
2	Inadequate ICT infrastructure limits digital reference services	3.31	0.52	2.91	0.98	3.76	0.56	Rejected

3	Lack of well-trained personnel hinders the provision of quality reference services	3.17	0.50	2.70	0.98	3.68	0.48	Accepted
4	Limited access to up-to-date information resources affects service delivery	1.67	0.51	2.99	0.95	3.95	0.40	Accepted
5	The workload on librarians makes it difficult to provide effective services	2.79	0.50	2.75	0.98	3.68	0.41	Accepted
6	There is erratic power supply and it affects the use of internet facilities	2.33	1.52	2.01	0.93	3.96	0.58	Accepted
7	Poor awareness of reference services among library users affects utilization	3.36	0.50	2.72	0.94	3.70	0.59	Accepted
8	The library lacks digital reference tools such as chatbots and AI assistance	3.76	0.40	2.90	0.95	3.85	0.62	Accepted

In table two, the researcher poised to find out the challenges librarians face in providing reference and information services in both MOUAU and ABSU library respectively. The table reveals that lack of digital reference tools such as chatbots and AI assistance with mean score of 3.76, Insufficient funding for quality of reference services with mean score of 3.55, Poor awareness of reference services among library users with mean score of 3.33, Inadequate ICT infrastructure limits digital reference services with mean score of 3.31 are the major issues affecting reference and information services provision in MOUAU while Limited access to up-to-date information resources with mean score of 2.99, Inadequate ICT infrastructure limits digital reference services with mean score of 2.91, lacks digital reference tools such as chatbots and AI assistance with mean score of 2.90, workload on librarians with mean score of 2.75, and Poor awareness of reference services with a mean score of 2.72 are the major challenges affecting the effective provision of reference and information services in Abia State University Library.

Research Question 3: What strategies can be implemented to enhance the quality of reference and information service delivery in public university libraries in Abia State?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Strategies that can be Implemented to Enhance the Quality of Reference and Information Service Delivery in Public University Libraries in Abia State

S/ N	Item Statements	MOUAU		ABSU		Overall Mean		Remark
		$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	
1	Increased funding will improve the quality of reference services	3.74	0.93	3.37	0.90	3.27	.81	Accepted
2	Regular training and workshops will enhance librarians' skills in service delivery	3.76	0.97	3.98	0.98	2.97	.73	Rejected
3	Upgrading library ICT infrastructure will improve online reference services	3.71	0.91	3.63	0.93	3.52	.88	Accepted
4	Promoting awareness campaigns will increase the use of reference services	3.74	0.97	3.85	0.97	3.17	.78	Accepted
5	Steady power supply to enable users use internet facilities	3.81	0.93	3.37	0.90	3.29	.82	Accepted
6	Expanding the collection of print and electronic resources will enhance service delivery	3.74	0.94	3.98	0.98	3.42	.85	Accepted
7	Collaboration with other universities will improve interlibrary loan services	2.36	0.91	3.71	0.94	3.37	.84	Accepted
8	The use of AI-powered chatbots can improve digital reference service efficiency	3.74	0.96	3.81	0.97	3.20	.79	Accepted

Table 3 shows the strategies that can be implemented to enhance the quality of reference and information service delivery in public university libraries in Abia State. In MOUAU library, steady power supply to enable librarians use internet facilities with mean score of 3.81, Regular training and workshops to enhance librarians' skills in service delivery with mean score of 2.76, use of AI-powered chatbots to improve digital reference service efficiency, Promoting awareness campaigns to increase the use of reference services, and Expanding the collection of print and electronic resources to enhance service delivery with mean score of 2.74 each were the

implementable strategies to enhance reference and information service delivery. Similarly, in ABSU library, Regular training and workshops to enhance librarians' skills in service delivery, Expanding the collection of print and electronic resources to enhance service delivery with mean score 3.98 each, Promoting awareness campaigns will increase the use of reference services with mean score of 3.85, use of AI-powered chatbots to improve digital reference service efficiency with mean score of 3.81, were the implementable strategies to enhance reference and information service delivery.

Discussion of Findings

On the reference and information services provided in both libraries, it was observed that out of the ten items of reference and information services that both libraries provided five each, to her users. These include; provision of directional services, ready reference services, research assistance referral services Current Awareness Services (CAS). This is in line with Cassell and Hiremath (2018), who classified reference and information services to include ready reference services, research assistance, instructional services, Referral Services, and virtual reference services. It is also in agreement with Odu and Eze, (2020) who identified Current Awareness Services (CAS) as reference and information service in the library.

In table 2, it was revealed that lack of digital reference tools such as chatbots and AI assistance, insufficient funding for quality of reference services, poor awareness of reference services, inadequate ICT infrastructure, limited access to up-to-date information resources and workload on librarians are the major issues affecting reference and information services. This finding corroborates with Hernon and Matthews (2015) whose finding revealed insufficient funding, limited access to up-to-date information resources, erratic power supply, and poor awareness of reference services among library users; Liu and Zhai (2020) who identified inadequate ICT infrastructure, lack of digital reference tools such as chatbots and AI assistance; Raju and Sahoo (2017) identified lack of well-trained personnel and workload on librarians as the major challenges librarians face in providing reference and information services in the public university libraries in Abia State.

Similarly, on the proposed strategies for improving reference and information service delivery in public university libraries in Abia State, the respondents proposed steady power supply, regular training and workshops, use of AI-powered chatbots, promoting awareness campaigns, and expanding the collection of print and electronic resources. This finding is in line with the findings of Wilson (2017), who suggested upgrading library ICT infrastructure to improve online reference services, use of AI-powered chatbots to improve digital reference service efficiency and Sadeh and Laszlo (2019) who suggested steady power supply to enable users use internet facilities, promoting awareness campaigns to increase the use of reference services and collaboration with other universities to improve interlibrary loan services etc as the strategies for improving reference and information services in public university libraries in Abia State

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the study on Reference and Information Service Delivery in Public University Libraries in Abia State, the following recommendations are made to enhance the effectiveness of these services:

1. The University libraries in Abia state should prioritize the integration of digital tools such as virtual reference platforms, live chat, and mobile-friendly databases.
2. To overcome identified challenges, such as inadequate staffing or limited subject expertise, libraries should invest in continuous professional development for librarians. Targeted training in information literacy instruction, digital resource navigation, and user communication skills will better equip librarians to provide high-quality reference support.
3. Improving reference and information services requires clear institutional support and structured policies. Libraries should establish internal guidelines for service evaluation and user feedback, while also collaborating with academic departments and ICT units to align services with curriculum demands and user expectations.

Conclusion

This study examined the delivery of reference and information services in public university libraries in Abia State, with a specific focus on Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUAAU), and Abia State University, Uturu (ABSU). The findings offer critical insights into the scope, challenges, and opportunities for enhancing library services within these institutions. The libraries surveyed provide a range of reference services including directional assistance, bibliographic instruction, current awareness services, online reference support, and literature search facilitation all of which are instrumental in advancing academic research and learning.

However, the study also uncovered significant barriers to effective service delivery. Chief among these are inadequate funding, limited access to digital information resources, insufficient professional development for library personnel, understaffing, and substandard infrastructure. These constraints significantly undermine the capacity of libraries to meet the evolving information needs of their users. To address these challenges, the study proposes a multi-faceted strategy that includes increased funding and resource allocation, continuous professional development for librarians, the integration of modern information and communication technologies, improved staffing levels, and the establishment of inter-institutional collaborations. The implementation of these recommendations has the potential to significantly enhance the quality, relevance, and responsiveness of reference and information service delivery in public university libraries across Abia State.

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