



# The Association of Commonwealth Universities

## **Transforming from Partnerships**

**Inaugural Planning Meeting of the ACU Libraries and Information Network, University of Botswana 22-24 October 2007**

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The ACU Planning meeting for Librarians that held at the University of Botswana, Gaborone, October 22 – 24, 2007 was a great opportunity to link up with other librarians in the Commonwealth, especially African University Librarians, who were seeking for solutions to a number of topical issues that affect library services in a new dispensation. Critical issues discussed, which have great potential for transforming libraries in Nigeria include: information literacy, benchmarking, and strategic engagements with institutions.

Information literacy is quite important. Libraries in Nigeria have in the last decade made several attempts to be relevant in the face of dwindling funds and changing paradigm for teaching and learning brought about by the compelling global information and communications technology. The capacity and ability of the libraries to align with the global trend in the delivery of library services have attained differing degrees of success. The upsurge in students enrolment in Nigerian universities, even with increasing number of universities – presently 91 (57 public, and 34 private), makes it inevitable for libraries to find out how to make the library project a success within the institution and globally.

One of the ways designed to bring about effect utilization of library resources has been the teaching of a ‘Use of the Library’ course to fresh undergraduate students. It is a credit-earning course approved for all universities by the National Universities Commission. The course introduces students to the library – its administration, organization and services. The course has been run for more than a decade in most of the libraries. Yet, as is the case in the University of Jos, most of the libraries are yet to realise a significant improvement in the use of the library and its resources by both staff and students. The concept of ‘information literacy’ as discussed at the ACU Libraries Network planning workshop was therefore of particular interest.

Information literacy implies appropriate use of information for predetermined result. This involves the inculcation of necessary skills to find, understand, evaluate, and use information in all available formats – print or electronic for teaching, research, and learning as a normal life-long competence. The library therefore faces the challenge of a paradigm shift – from the traditional Use of Library teaching to impacting information competency skills. This, perhaps, is a significant product of the ACU planning meeting which Nigerian libraries, particularly the University of Jos can build upon. Adequate information literacy has the potential of empowering universities to produce ‘employable’ graduates who are able to define and refine data to meet specific information needs. This will affect the number of ‘unemployable’ graduates in the labour market.

The other significant topic discussed at the planning meeting is “Quality Assurance and Benchmarking”. The presentation of a best practice by Robert Moropa – University Librarian of the

University of Pretoria was quite insightful. In the University of Jos, as in most Nigerian university libraries, we have had some sort of library evaluations in the past, but not standardized. Benchmarking is a more rigorous institutional audit that is measurable, though costly. However, the benefits of such an exercise include better prioritizing, a more effective use of organizational resources, and a highly resourceful library services. In the words of Moropa, “You cannot have a top class international university serviced by a mediocre library”. Quality assurance and benchmarking in university libraries are therefore a *sine qua non* for a total institutional growth and quality. The information, which came up during panel discussion that libraries in the United Kingdom are already moving from Quality Assurance towards Quality Enhancements is indicative of how important the topic is. Indeed, great challenge lies before university libraries to embark on quality assurance and benchmarking, within their institutional strategic plans in order to be effective partners in institutional development.

The third significant topic covered during the ACU planning meeting is “Strategic Engagements with Institutions”. The topic was truly engaging: librarians must inch their way into every stratum of the university community in order to garner support for the delivery of services. According to Bojosi Otlhogile, Vice Chancellor University of Botswana who led the discussion, in most institutions, the library is usually the “last to be informed, but the first to be consulted”. He illustrated by citing the introduction of new courses on campus, where the library gets to know of a new course only when students enroll and are looking for materials on the course. Librarians and academic and administrative staff of universities must work together with one vision. Librarians need to be proactive and creative in engaging their partners to contribute to the growth and effective use of library resources. The role of the librarian was, perhaps, best captured by John Shipp – University Librarian, University of Sydney, Australia, when he submitted that the “University Librarian has to be an arch politician”. Of course, this is in the sense of getting relevant resources appropriated to the library.

On the whole, the ACU Planning Meeting in the University of Botswana, Gaborone, has the potential of reactivating academic excellence in Commonwealth universities and bringing the products of the institutions at par. This is in terms of knowledge sphere which a comparable provision of library resources and services can enhance. Therefore, the review of the ACU Low Journals Scheme with the possible accommodation of online resources, and promotion of collaboration for research among Commonwealth university libraries as discussed during the meeting, are indicators of a new and productive approach to networking among Commonwealth University Libraries. The end result of all these will be the transformation of Commonwealth university libraries, especially those in Africa. The LINK should be sustained.