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Lessons for librarians: Career of Ghana’s Dr Helena Asamoah-Hassan

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LESSONS FOR LIBRARIANS: CAREER OF GHANA’S DR HELENA ASAMOA-HASSAN

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The mission of librarians is to provide access to information required for the satisfaction of their users. This article brings to the fore the need for academic librarians in particular to assert themselves and reinforce their competencies in their bid to serve a very complex clientele in the age of information and communication technology and changes in higher education.

Design/Methodology: The authors achieved the purpose of this study through a brief review of the literature in an attempt to identify some standards expected of highly competent librarians. Through a face to face interview with a seasoned Ghanaian librarian, these standards are then tested in a bid to ascertain some of the notions of excellent academic librarianship.

Findings: The study revealed among others that a highly successful career in librarianship is achievable but requires awareness of and abiding by the professional standards and expectations of modern academic librarianship. Again, the need for continuous professional development among librarians and commitment to the ultimate growth of the library profession is given credence through the interviewee’s long-term participation in the activities of the international library fraternity both in Ghana and abroad.

Originality/value: The paper is able to illustrate that academic librarians could achieve excellence in their career if they consciously abide by the standards of academic librarianship devised by many international and national library organisations.

Keywords: University librarian; mentorship; scholarly publishing; continuous professional development, interview.
INTRODUCTION

An economist, Galbraith, is known to have said that "there are two types of economists—those who don't know the future, and those who don't know they don't know." Some librarians have the burden of being in such a class of professionals. Library professionals play a central role in the academic enterprise and this role cannot be taken for granted by anyone, including librarians themselves. The 21st century academic librarian is expected to possess qualities that would make his status as an academic or scholar justified in the face of emerging requirements within the academic, social and political environments of his trade. Some of these qualities, according to the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL, 2010) include foundational knowledge, interpersonal skills, leadership and management, collection development, information literacy, research & contributions to the profession and information technology skills. These sets of core competency skills require that the successful practitioner develops expertise in specific areas, but builds and maintains a strong, well-rounded understanding of the library, the campus, and the larger scholarly communication environment. Anyira (2011) affirms these notions by proposing that being a librarian is not enough qualification in the 21st century library and that there is a need for librarians to develop themselves by undergoing self-sponsored training/skills acquisition in areas like information and communication technology (ICT).

Statement of the Problem

Various studies have indicated the need for mentorship in the field of librarianship. A study of the literature has revealed that there are vast amount of knowledge with professionals. However, due to limitations of formal knowledge sharing programmes, experiences of experts are often untapped by younger professionals. This situation has created a gap in the knowledge base of the profession between the more experienced professionals and the novices. In Ghana and other Sub-Saharan African countries, the situation is a stark contrast to what pertains in developed countries where there exist formal programmes to encourage knowledge sharing and impartation of experiences. There is therefore a need to identify some of the factors that contribute to successful career attainment in the library profession. The present study therefore set out to explore some of these factors in an attempt to fill the knowledge gap in the literature concerning successful career development through the eyes of an accomplished librarian.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to explore some of the key competencies required for a successful career in librarianship by highlighting on the experiences of a seasoned librarian in Ghana.

The study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What key academic and professional competencies are required to become a successful librarian?
2. What contemporary issues in librarianship affect successful career development?
3. Does engagement in professional activities contribute to successful career development?

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using the life history approach within the qualitative framework. This method presents a framework for working with participants’ interviews in a way that allows their stories to emerge, as well to explore these stories within the social, political, historical, cultural, familial and psychological context within which they are embedded (Matiss, 2007). This method, being a form of interview studies is most consistent with interviews. The interview assumed an open-ended structure with a conversational tone and thus allowing the subject to define the world in unique ways (Merriam, 1998). This was made possible with the use of an interview guide with seventeen (17) items. The interview was conducted in person with the librarian in her office. The responses were tape recorded and transcribed thereafter and presented them verbatim to accord the reader an intimate insight into the life of the subject. Given the varied uses, individual nature and unique spirit of life history and narrative work, standard methodologies have not been developed nor are they expected to be (Matiss, 2007). The results were discussed according to themes identified as relevant to addressing the research questions and presented in a discussion section with the themes.

Results of the Interview

1. Question: Tell us about your background?
   Response: I obtained my Ordinary and Advanced level certificates at the Konongo Odumarsi Secondary School (now Konongo Odumarsi Senior High School) in 1970 and 1972 respectively. I then proceeded for my Bachelor in Library Science (BLS) and Master of Arts in Library Studies (MA Lib Studies) degrees from the Ahmadu Bello University,(ABU) Zaria, Nigeria (1974-77) and the University of Ghana (1979-81) respectively. In 2011, I earned a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in African
Art and Culture from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) Ghana. I developed interest in librarianship between 1972 and 1974, when I worked as a Junior Library Assistant in KNUST, then University of Science and Technology Library, so I applied and gained admission to ABU for my Bachelor's degree and followed it up with a Master's degree. In 1993, I returned to the KNUST as a Senior Assistant Librarian, having previously held similar positions at the MUCAST Library, Makurdi, the Benue State Public Library Service, the Lagos State Polytechnic Library and the Library of the National Water Resources Institute in Kaduna, all in Nigeria. When the position for University Librarian became vacant in 1998 and was advertised in 1999, I applied and was appointed the University Librarian and assumed office on 1st October 2000.

2. **Question:** What motivated you to seek appointment as university librarian?

**Response:** When I finished my first degree, I made up my mind that I wanted to end my career as a University Librarian because that is the ultimate in the library profession in our environment. As a result, I started writing scholarly articles, getting myself exposed, and since I was then in Nigeria, I got myself involved in the Nigeria Library Association’s activities where I became a Second National Vice President at a time. At KNUST, I knew there were three areas in terms of progressions that is, library work load, publications and service to the community, so I started working at them right away when I was a Senior Assistant Librarian.

3. **Question:** What are your responsibilities as university librarian of KNUST?

**Response:** As the university librarian, I am responsible for providing overall leadership for the university library system consisting of the Main Library, 6 College libraries and other Unit libraries and the provision of library and information services in the university to support teaching, learning and research.

4. **Question:** Do you think it has become easier now to become a university librarian than it was prior to your appointment?

**Response:** Today, I don’t think it is easier, because the requirements are increasing. I don’t even know what will be required when it is time for me to retire and a new university librarian would have to be appointed. The university librarian position is an academic one and equivalent to a full Professor. So if you are a full Professor, the requirements of a full Professor must apply. Consequently, if the requirements must apply then it means that one must have a PhD and some publications in refereed local and international journals in order to be appointed.

5. **Question:** What motivated you to obtain a doctorate degree?

**Response:** What motivated me to obtain my doctorate degree was the desire to elevate my profile. When one works in an academic institution, and one has colleagues who are academics with doctorate degrees, the likelihood is that they will think that they are more knowledgeable than one is. I however believe that when one has a researched Master’s degree, that is a breakthrough. But again to fit into the academic system, a doctorate degree is relevant. So I think those are the things which really made me to eventually do it.

6. **Question:** What would you say about the debate about librarian faculty status, is it necessary or we simply want to belong to a more prestigious club of academics?

**Response:** The work of the librarian is more inclined towards academic and research work and because of that, we have to belong to that fold. Academic and research work involve research and publications which librarians, like lecturers, do and produce and these count towards their promotion. In the final analysis it is the relevance of one’s work and functions towards effective academic work in the university that should decide where librarians should belong to.

7. **Question:** What would you say about the quality of education for librarians in Ghana? Would you support or not, the decentralisation of education for librarians and why?

**Response:** I think the teaching is good, but people lack a lot of practical experience when they complete their studies so when they come to the field, that is, when they get employed in libraries, we need to train them. I think that for the Master’s degree level, we don’t need any decentralization, otherwise we would have a real avalanche or over load of professionals who may not have work to do. So even with our current situation of only one library school, what we need to do is to strengthen it to continue to offer relevant courses and not increase admission numbers where we will end up with a glut of Masters degree graduates with no work. Concerning Diploma and Bachelor’s degree holders, we need a lot of them to fill the technical level so that we will have support staff who have library training, with the ability to offer some professional services as against what the secondary school leavers offer now. We could decentralize the running of the Diploma programmes to allow one or two polytechnics, for instance, to offer the course.

8. **Question:** What are some of your professional engagements outside your normal schedule of work?

**Response:** When I became the university librarian, the next thing I wanted to do was to forge links internationally as that will have a positive effect on the development of
the KNUST Library System. My first port of call was at the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). In 2003, there was an advert for people to stand for election into the Africa Section Standing Committee of IFLA. I made myself available and got elected for an initial four year term. I became a member of the Africa Section Standing Committee and after only two years as a member I was elected as the Chairperson. That was the beginning of my fast climb on the IFLA ladder. I was the Chairperson of the Africa Section for two years and I was encouraged to stand for election for a position on the Governing Board, the highest body of IFLA. I stood for election, and I won for a first term of two years. This happened in 2007 and subsequently I contested for a second term in 2009 and again won. I believe I got into these positions because of hard work and that is what I still adhere to in every activity I am involved in.

Again in 2004, the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Ghana (CARLIGH) was formed to gain access to electronic resources at a reasonable cost to support academic and research work in institutions in Ghana. I put the draft constitution together. Later on I was asked to Chair the Management Committee which I did from August 2004 to December 2013—Just at that time, the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI-INASP) and also the Electronic Information for Libraries Network (eIFL.net) came on board and I was made the Country Coordinator for both of them up till March 2014. As a result of my enthusiasm and hard work these two organisations started using me as a Facilitator in Africa and Asia on Consortium building and other library related workshops which I still do. Emerald Publishing approached me in 2011 to serve as their 1st Regional Advisor for Africa which I did up to December 2013. I am also currently the Founding President of the African Library and information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA) which was founded in 2013 to assist in improving library associations and library personnel to enable them provide current and more effective services to our communities in Africa. I am also a Counsellor for the maiden IFLA International Leadership Program for 2012-2014 and since December 2013 have been INASP’s Associate for Africa where I perform an advisory role. Finally, since 2009 I have been a member of UNESCO’s International Advisory Committee on the Memory of the World Programme and in June 2013 was elected the Chairperson of the Committee, the 1st African to hold that position in the 20 years of the Committee’s existence.

9. Question: Would you admit that it was being the university librarian that initially shot you into the international limelight?
Response: No, I do not think that it is just being a university librarian but being a hard working, focused, development and result oriented university librarian was the key. You need to use your own resources to develop, that is, invest in yourself and not wait for your employers to do that for you. The benefits of investing in yourself are that people get to know you globally. As at now, in fact, and with all humility, when you talk about key players in African librarianship, in almost every country in Africa, my name is mentioned as one of them, as I am known personally and through my activities.

10. Question: Do you think that scholarly publication in Ghana is of the desired quality especially in library and information science publications?
Response: I think the quality is good based on the reviewers comments which approve the articles for publication. I don’t think there is a problem with that, however I always say that if one publishes in a library journal in Ghana, and also publishes in one outside, then the quality of the person is the same. But if one’s papers are not accepted outside, then there is a question mark on the quality of one’s paper published in Ghana. So I always tell colleagues to publish in the Ghana Library Journal and other local journals, but also publish in international journals, and if in open access journals, publish in the internationally recognised and registered ones, for example in indexing services such as DOAJ. This is because if you start rising up to the associate professor level, that is the deputy librarian level, you must have publications in international journals. If your publications are all found in local journals, the committee reviewing your publications for promotion would question your credibility as a professional of international repute.

11. Question: What do you make of the assertion that open access is the future of scholarly communication in Africa?
Response: Most institutions cannot subscribe to current journals because of lack of funding, but with open access publishing, somebody else pays for it. It can also be paid for through research grants. When you seek a grant for research, you budget for publications, so when you finish your research, through the funds allocated in the grant for publications you publish. So in a way, the research pays for itself. Research results from the south goes to the north because the north has money to publish, also we do a lot of research here and the results stay in our institutions because we don’t have the money to publish them. It is also expensive to acquire print and online journals. But with open access journals, the payments are not as much as that of the commercial ones. Open access publishing, to me, is the best way of growing scholarly publication in Africa.

12. Question: What is your view of the role of ICT in academic libraries in Ghana especially in the 21st century?
Response: I think ICT is very important in information access and delivery. I see it as a 'pipe' through which information flows. The content, that is the information, comes through the Library. People must have information when they need it and it must satisfy their needs and unlike in the days of old when you had to open a book for every information, with the advent of technology, with a few keywords and the click of a mouse, the information comes to you.

13. Question: Do you agree that every academic library must embark on automation?
Response: Of course yes. This is because a lot of information published in current journals can only be accessed through computerized systems. As an academic institution, current information is needed to assist in current research. So definitely, academic libraries must be automated, so as to provide real-time information for users.

14. Question: As a former President of the Ghana Library Association (GLA), do you think the Association has played a significant role in National Development?
Response: Yes and No. No because it is not every time that the government consults the Association when it wants to take decisions related to libraries. However, the GLA contributes her quota to national development through professional articles in its journal, the Ghana Library Journal. Most of the articles in the journal are towards national development, that is, developing libraries for national development. The Association also builds capacity in library professionals, so I think that in a way that is what the Association is doing to contribute to national development.

15. Question: What were your achievements as President of the GLA?
Response: I think there were two main achievements; firstly, under my leadership, we published the maiden Directory of libraries and librarians in Ghana. Secondly, we revised the constitution and introduced the membership accreditation and certification requirement.

16. Question: Do you think there is a role for mentoring in the Library profession?
Response: There is a need for mentoring in order to pass down or transfer expertise. Sometimes it can be done by sharing experiences unofficially. In other times, junior colleagues could give their draft articles to a senior colleague who is experienced to review it before submitting it to a journal for publication. It can also be done through co-publishing where a less experienced person first develops the idea and does some literature searches, produces a first draft and then gives it to the more experienced person to work further on it. For instance, I may not have the time to write but I may have the time to discuss and offer input about a topic which the junior colleague can put together into an article for co-publication. The advantage here is that the experienced colleague who publishes quality articles will launch the junior colleague into publishing as it is likely that their paper will be accepted for publication.

17. Question: What advice would you offer younger librarians who look up to you for inspiration?
Response: What drives me is hard work, determination, honesty, frankness and transparency. As I sit here in my office and even throughout the whole university, I do not think that anyone can come and lay counter claims to these attributes that I have listed. Be transparent, let people know that your yes is yes and your no is no and be ready to justify and defend every action that you take as being the right thing to do at the right time for the right result.

Discussion of Findings

Academic and professional competencies and career development

The first task of the study was to examine academic and professional competencies required for a successful career in librarianship. Our singular subject demonstrates comprehensive academic and professional expertise. This is in tandem with the CARL standards which expects the 21st Century librarian to be grounded on a solid foundation of professional practice and by developing expertise in specific areas, with a well-rounded understanding of the library, the campus, and the larger scholarly communications environment (CARL, 2010). In response to our question of her academic background, it was revealed that she had attained the highest possible credentials in education by obtaining her doctorate degree in addition to prior professional training in librarianship. Anyira (2011) supports this pursuit by saying that personal self-development is the key for continuous relevance. It was also interesting to note that the subject in her early career days held several diverse library roles where she actually performed professional duties like cataloguing and classification. Seadle (2005) expresses support to this practice by proposing that the education of librarians for the twenty-first century needs to include practical training, just as the education of teaching faculty must include some training in how to manage a classroom.

Contemporary issues and career development

The study also set out to find out modern issues in librarianship that help in successful career development. Questions like the need for "library automation, ICT in academic libraries, scholarly publications and library faculty status" were posed to the subject. She responded that for librarians to be accepted in the academic community as faculty members, they need to research and publish in both local and internationally recognised journals. She continued, "I think ICT is very important in information access and delivery. I see it as a 'pipe' through which information flows. The content, that is the information, comes through the Library" ICTs must be
recognised as tools that librarians can and must use to meet the information requirements of users. This is in line with Ademodi and Adepoju (2009) who opine that the only way of satisfying user demand is to use ICT in information service delivery.

**Professional activities and career development**

The study was also interested in the role community service plays in professional development. The senior librarian demonstrated succinctly that her work for the national and international library community is part of her success story. This does not need re-telling. Aside being a former president of the Ghana Library Association, she served on the Governing Council of IFLA. She also had major stints with UNESCO and so many other information institutions. She crowned it all with her pioneering effort in the founding of AFLIA of which she is the founding president. The benefits of engagement in professional activities is clearly expressed by Osei (1996) that it enables staff to cope with modern technology, new trends and current developments. These engagements in turn results in enhanced staff performance and job effectiveness and overall improvement in the quality of the labour force. Finally, professional activities has the potential to broaden and widen staff knowledge and experiences and consequently create skilful librarians.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this interview was to ascertain the notions of success of the 21st century librarian with a seasoned Ghanaian university librarian of international repute, who is at the twilight of her career. The study was conducted as a single case interview involving the primary subject. The results of the interview were captured in the words of the subject to ensure readers’ intimate appreciation of the issues. The interaction revealed among other things that the subject determined the course of her career at a very early stage of her life and that above all she made the choice to become a librarian. She was also well aware of the professional standards and expectations of her chosen career. Finally, she is seen to be committed to the ultimate growth of the library profession both in Ghana and internationally as is evidenced in her long international library fraternity. Based on the findings of the interview, the following recommendations are being suggested to strengthen the practice of academic librarianship in Ghana:

i. Prospective academic or university librarians must determine the course of their careers well in advance so as to employ every moral and legal method to achieve their career goals.

ii. All practicing academic or university librarians and future professionals must be ready to pursue further education beyond their initial qualifying certificates, preferably terminal degrees to befit the scholarly status imputed on them.

iii. Again librarians or prospective ones must know the professional requirements and standards of their jobs so as to be able to progress to the highest possible rank.

iv. Furthermore, practicing academic or university librarians and future professionals must be proactive and be committed to continuous professional development either through institutional support or self-sponsored initiatives.

v. Academic or university librarians or prospective ones must be consistent, ethical, hardworking, and honest in a bid to promote a positive image for the library profession.

vi. Current or future academic library professionals must embrace knowledge sharing, collaboration in research and publication and practical participation in activities that promote the mission of their parent organizations which are teaching, learning, research and community service.

vii. Finally, librarians aiming at the top position of their profession need to network, get involved in international librarianship to ensure exposure to what obtains in other cultures so that they may deploy the progressive ones in their libraries. These activities will come in handy when one gets to top most position and one needs to bring in innovative services to improve on the services being offered. Being successful at this is a feather in the cap of a successful university librarian.

**REFERENCES**


