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LEVERAGING FEE-BASED LIBRARY SERVICES FOR WEALTH CREATION: AN EMPOWERING APPROACH FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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Abstract
In an era of dwindling public funding and increasing demand for innovative library services, academic libraries must explore sustainable strategies to remain relevant and financially viable. This paper explores the concept of fee-based library services as a strategic approach to wealth creation within academic institutions. By transitioning from traditionally free models to structured, value-added services for a fee- such as research consultancy, information literacy training, document delivery, and access to specialized databases- academic libraries can unlock new streams of revenue. The study highlights how such services, when ethically and strategically implemented, not only generate income but also enhance the visibility, prestige, and user engagement of the library. Through a review of existing practices, case studies, and policy frameworks, the paper advocates for a shift in perception from libraries as cost centers to entrepreneurial entities. It further proposes an empowering framework that balances service quality, affordability, and institutional mission. Therefore, the paper asserts that fee-based services, when aligned with user needs and institutional goals, can position academic libraries as active contributors to wealth creation and knowledge-driven development.

Introduction

In an era marked by dwindling government funding and rising operational costs, academic libraries are increasingly compelled to explore innovative models for sustainability and relevance. One such model is the strategic deployment of fee-based library services which is an approach that not only diversifies income streams but also fosters knowledge-driven economic empowerment within and beyond the academic community. By leveraging specialized services such as research support, data analysis, information literacy training, digital content access, and consultancy, libraries can position themselves as active contributors to institutional revenue and national development.

Traditionally viewed as cost centers, academic libraries are now reimagining their roles as entrepreneurial entities capable of generating wealth through the commodification of select services. This transformation aligns with global best practices that encourage libraries to balance open access ideals with fee-based models to meet the demands of diverse users, especially postgraduate researchers, external scholars, and industry professionals, who require advanced, tailored information solutions. Importantly, this shift does not undermine the core mission of academic libraries to provide equitable access to knowledge; rather, it enhances their capacity to serve wider audiences sustainably. Fee-based services, when well-regulated and transparently managed, can empower libraries to upgrade infrastructure, invest in staff development, and innovate user services, ultimately contributing to national knowledge economies (Smith, 2022).

Bello, Bokoh and Ajiboye (2023) construed a library as an organized collection of published and unpublished books and audiovisual materials with the aid of services of Librarians that are able to provide and discuss such material as required, to meet the informative, research, educational and recreational needs of its users.” These components were critical enablers of successful research activities, reinforcing the functional components. As Nwalo (2013) emphasizes, academic libraries must embrace entrepreneurial thinking to remain viable and impactful in the face of economic pressures and technological disruption. Through careful policy formulation, stakeholder engagement, and service quality assurance, fee-based services can be a pragmatic avenue for wealth creation while upholding the academic library’s enduring commitment to education and research.

Library Service

Library services are many services given by libraries to its patrons or users. These services are intended to address the information and educational requirements of library users, encourage literacy, and support lifelong learning. According to the American Library Association, library services are "the activities and resources provided by libraries to meet the information needs of their users. Similarly, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA 2019) defines library services as "the range of services provided by libraries to meet the information and knowledge needs of their users, promote literacy and support lifelong learning." This definition emphasizes the user-centered role of libraries in fostering educational development, access to information, and a culture of lifelong learning within society .

Overall, library services are critical for providing information access, encouraging literacy, and supporting lifelong learning. These services differ based on the type of library, but they typically include Information Access, Research Assistance, Technology Support, Community Literacy Programmes, Digital lending, Reference and Research Assistance, Technology Support, Indexing and Abstracting Services, Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC), Current Awareness Services (CAS), Selective Dissemination of Information, Loan (Book), Reference/Referral, Information Packaging and Repackaging, Documentation, Bindery and Reprographic, Inter-Library Loan, Document Delivery, Literature Search, Scholarly Database Search, and Retrieval, Book Reservation, Library Orientation, and Internet Services, among other services (Chukwueke, Onuoha & Nnadozie, 2018).

Fee-Based Library Services in Academic Libraries for Wealth Creation

While academic libraries traditionally provide free access to information and resources, some libraries have started offering fee-based services because of the fact that libraries in most developing nations are facing poor-funding of their programs and services: the academic libraries are not exclusive of this. These fee-based services often go beyond the traditional lending of books and focus on providing specialized resources and expertise to help the library build wealth and manage their affairs effectively. The concept of fee-based services for Olaseigbe et al. (2024), is more of self-sustaining fee-based initiatives. Self-sustaining library services through strategic fee-based initiatives is a road map for academic library administrators in Nigeria, which identified ten monetizable services such as digitization, citation management, virtual reference, tech lending, and data curation and fee-based models can foster innovation, boost user satisfaction, and generate revenue but success requires strategic planning, user education, marketing, and quality control.

However, Ngulube, (2023) state that in today's world, access to information is essential for wealth creation and financial independence. Unfortunately, many people do not have the financial resources to purchase books or attend expensive seminars to gain the knowledge they need to succeed. However, there is a solution: fee-based library services. Libraries have been around for centuries and have always been a great resource for those seeking knowledge and information. Today, libraries have evolved to provide access to a wide range of resources, including books, magazines, newspapers, and digital content. This makes them an invaluable resource for anyone looking to build wealth and achieve financial independence. In response to paucity of funds in Nigerian University libraries, Bolanle, Clifford and Ishola (2014) suggested that library managers should introduce fee based library services to provide and sustain quality library services to library users. This clearly reflects the viewpoint that academic libraries, particularly in developing nations, are compelled to adopt fee-based services due to under funding.

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The idea of librarians as multifaceted professionals who navigate, curate, teach, lead, and innovate in the information age. Thiruppathi (2024) underscores that librarians have transformed into information architects, digital curators, and knowledge facilitators—roles that echo the diverse functions like facilitator, navigator, promoter, manager, and visionary. Furthermore, Vinuta (2020) explores how librarians have transitioned from being solely custodians to becoming facilitators of digital access, technology experts, and educators. They now organize and preserve digital collections, instruct users on search strategies, and evaluate information quality—clearly reflecting the roles of instructor, evaluator, organizer, preserver, and technical expert. This explains why Patel and Sharma (2022) averred that librarians offer the following roles:

i. Facilitate learning and discovery through training and literacy programs.

ii. Advise and consult on research strategies and information technologies.

iii. Organize and preserve both physical and digital knowledge assets.

iv. Promote and communicate within their communities.

v. Lead and manage initiatives, services, and strategic directions.

vi. Innovate entrepreneurial solutions with user-centered, tech-enabled services.

vii. Together, this body of work provides contemporary evidence that librarians are not just information stewards but pivotal agents of economic and social value in the digital era.

Justification for Fee-Based Library Services

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Ishola (2019) emphasized fee-based services as vital for Nigerian academic libraries grappling with funding deficits, highlighting their role in sustaining service quality and operational continuity. The author identified several reasons why fee-based library services are necessary, especially in situation where traditional funding is insufficient. These justifications include:

i. Supplementing Inadequate Funding: Libraries face chronic under funding from governments and institutions, necessitating alternative revenue streams to sustain services and collections.

ii. Enhancing Service Quality and Accessibility: Fee-based services allow libraries to invest in improved technologies, extended hours, and specialized resources, improving user satisfaction.

iii. Meeting Diverse User Needs: Charging for specialized or value-added services ensures that libraries can tailor offerings to specific user groups, including corporate, research, or professional audiences.

iv. Promoting Sustainable Library Management: Generating internal revenue supports financial independence and long-term sustainability, reducing reliance on volatile external funding.

v. Encouraging Efficient Resource Use: Fees can help manage demand and prioritize high-value services, optimizing resource allocation.

Ishola (2019) emphasized fee-based services as vital for Nigerian academic libraries grappling with funding deficits, highlighting their role in sustaining service quality and operational continuity. Similarly, Chisita and Zhou (2022) state that fee-based services help libraries in Zimbabwe to diversify funding and expand digital offerings despite economic constraints. Ngulube (2023) argued that in many developing countries, fee-based models foster innovative service delivery and increase financial resilience amid unstable government budgets.

Latest Insights on Tools and Resources for Fee-Based Services in Academic Libraries

Academic libraries seeking to leverage fee-based services for wealth creation are increasingly adopting innovative digital tools and resources that enhance value, attract paying users, and diversify revenue streams. Recent research highlights the following categories:

1. Digital Platforms for E-Resources Access and Licensing: Subscription-based access to premium databases, e-journals, and e-books (e.g., ScienceDirect, JSTOR, ProQuest) allows libraries to offer specialized content on a fee basis for research groups and corporate clients. Tools for digital rights management (DRM) ensure compliance and protect content, enabling sustainable fee structures. Example: Cloud-based library services (like OverDrive and EBSCOhost) streamline access and payment systems.

Oludare and Adebayo (2023) emphasize that digital platforms increase user convenience and support scalable fee models.

2. Integrated Library Systems (ILS) and Automated Fee Management: Modern ILS like Koha, Alma, and Sierra incorporate modules for fee tracking, payment processing, and service customization, allowing libraries to efficiently manage fee-based services such as inter-library loans, document delivery, and special collections access. Automated notification and billing systems reduce overhead and improve user experience. Kumar and Reddy (2024) highlight the importance of automation in sustaining fee-based service models.

3. Research Data Management and Consultancy Tools: Academic libraries increasingly offer data curation, analysis, and management services as premium offerings for faculty and research institutions. Tools such as DMPTool, OpenRefine, and NVivo facilitate these services. Librarians act as consultants, supporting grant applications, compliance, and data publication. Ndlovu and Moyo (2023) note that research data services create revenue streams by addressing emerging needs in academia.

4. Digital Literacy and Training Platforms: Fee-based workshops and courses on information literacy, digital skills, data management, and scholarly communication can be delivered via platforms like Moodle, Zoom, or Coursera. These services target

students, researchers, and external professionals. Patel and Sharma (2022) document how training services enhance library visibility and financial sustainability.

5. Specialized Knowledge and Intellectual Property Services: Libraries provide fee-based patent searches, market research, copyright advisory, and knowledge commercialization support, leveraging tools like WIPO Patentscope and Google Patents. These services align closely with wealth creation by aiding innovation and entrepreneurship. Garcia and Lee (2024) demonstrate the value of intellectual property services in academic libraries fee-based offerings.

Recommendations

1. Develop diverse fee-Based service portfolios: Academic libraries should design and offer a broad range of fee-based services such as specialized research support, digital resource access, training workshops, document delivery, and consultancy on information management. This diversification helps tap into multiple revenue streams and meets varied user needs.

2. Invest in Modern technology and infrastructure: To support scalable and user-friendly fee-based services, libraries must invest in robust digital platforms, integrated library systems, secure payment gateways, and automated service management tools. This enhances service delivery and encourages consistent patronage.

3. Strengthen marketing and user awareness: Libraries should proactively market their fee-based offerings to internal and external stakeholders—students, faculty, researchers, corporate clients, and alumni—highlighting value, convenience, and exclusivity. Awareness campaigns and user education foster uptake and sustainability.

4. Build capacity and expertise among library staff: Continuous professional development focused on entrepreneurship, customer service, digital literacy, and data analytics is essential. Skilled librarians acting as consultants, instructors, and innovators drive the success of fee-based services.

5. Establish transparent pricing and flexible payment models: Clear, competitive, and affordable pricing structures tailored to different user groups encourage wider adoption. Flexible payment options (e.g., subscriptions, pay-per-use, bundled services) accommodate diverse financial capabilities.

6. Forge strategic partnerships and collaborations: Collaborations with academic departments, research centers, industries, and government agencies can enhance service offerings and open new funding avenues. Partnerships may also include joint ventures for specialized services like patent searches or data analysis.

7. Ensure quality and user-centered service delivery: Sustained wealth creation depends on service quality, responsiveness, and relevance. Libraries should regularly gather user feedback, monitor service effectiveness, and innovate to align offerings with emerging academic and market demands.

8. Advocate for supportive policies and institutional backing: Librarians should engage university leadership and policymakers to recognize fee-based services as integral to library sustainability and wealth creation, ensuring institutional support, regulatory clarity, and reinvestment of revenues.

Conclusion

By strategically leveraging fee-based library services, academic libraries can transform from purely cost centers into active wealth creators and empowering agents within their institutions and communities. This approach not only addresses funding challenges but also reinforces libraries' relevance in the modern knowledge economy.

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