

An Intense gaze on the nature of reference services and sources in Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the nature of reference services and sources in the Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. The study is anchored in a descriptive research design. The study sample comprised 13 library staff (para-professionals and professional librarians). The study adopted the judgmental sampling technique, considering only para-professionals and professional librarians, as they are the core service providers in the library. Data were collected using an observational inventory. The collected data were analyzed using frequency count and percentage. Items with a Yes percentage above 50% were accepted. Findings reveal that lack of ICT skills, inadequate ICT facilities, and poor internet connectivity are the challenges confronting the delivery of reference services. It was recommended that academic libraries build their own library websites, create online platforms for users to interact with human librarians or chatbots, and optimize their social media accounts.

(Key words: reference; reference services; reference sources; Academic Library)

I. INTRODUCTION

The library is a service-oriented organization that houses diverse information resources that can be consulted to extract reliable information. The rudimentary purpose of the academic library is to provide adequate information products required to support the academic programs of the parent institution and satisfy the varying information needs of patrons within and beyond the campus community (Mmejim & Oporum 2022). In satisfying patrons' needs, librarians are to render quality services. Librarians are expected to assist clueless patrons who are not knowledgeable about effective library searching; this enables patrons to appreciate research, enhance their use of library resources, and see library services, particularly reference services, as crucial. Reference services help connect a patron with the right document at the right time, thereby saving time.

Reference service is one of the specialized aspects of librarianship, which every probable librarian must properly comprehend. Olubiyo and Jamogha (2022) confirmed that it is the personal help offered to customers in search of knowledge; consequently, anyone who needs information, no matter the subject, should consider the library's reference department their first point of contact. According to Egunjobi et al. (2022), this department has the personnel and material resources to respond to any

information request from the patron. While it can give some information right away, it can also direct the patron to more thorough information via a number of library resources. Reference services at academic libraries are critical for delivering information to users, particularly when they have questions or concerns.

Reference services entail the personal assistance librarians provide to individual readers seeking information. Sadiku et al. (2018) stated that reference services involve not only locating the materials where the required information can be found but also sorting out the relevant information. Udensi and Akor (2015) defined these services as direct personal support to readers seeking information in the library. Academic libraries exist to assist the teaching, research, and service missions of their parent institutions. Reference services are frequently provided in academic libraries to help library clients determine which library materials to consult. Reference services play a crucial role in academic libraries by assisting patrons who need information and promoting the effective use of library resources.

Reference services in Nigerian libraries are an age-old tradition, as reference librarians serve as guides, directing information seekers to the latest information inherent in a particular field of human endeavor. Despite their significance, reference services face various problems,

such as delays in service delivery, insufficient reference materials, poor internet connectivity, and poor ICT facilities, which hinder their efficiency and effectiveness.

An intense gaze on the nature of reference services is indeed a vital topic to be deliberated, as reference services are critical drivers of research and factual information.

This study examines the nature of reference services in Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. Specifically, the study investigates the types of reference sources and reference services available, identifies the methods used to provide these services, and identifies the challenges involved in delivering them at Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library.

Reference service in academic libraries

A librarian in charge of the reference department actively provides information-seeking services and direction to library clients who are looking for information. These services include expert advice and support from library professionals, based on items in the library or elsewhere, to help users meet their information needs. Akor and Alhassan (2015) described it as direct individual assistance to readers seeking information in a library. Individual education is frequently provided as part of reference services, which helps to produce more information-literate consumers. Ademodi (2015) defined reference work as direct, human assistance within a library for those seeking information for any reason, as well as numerous library activities aimed at making knowledge as accessible as possible. There are various reference services offered to patrons in a typical academic library, including Current Awareness Services (CAS), Referral Service, Inter-library Loan, Document Delivery Services, and Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) Services (Okwu, 2021).

Types of reference sources

There are different types of reference sources found in a typical academic library, which are discussed thus:

- **Dictionary:** The term dictionary emanates from the Latin word “dicto,” which means word or phrase. It is a book that people consult for the definition, meaning, spelling, pronunciation, and syllabication of a word. Obi (2013) stated that it deals either with words of a language or words related to a particular branch of knowledge. Dictionaries often include synonyms, antonyms, and acronyms, along with the meanings of some personal names and abbreviations.
- **Biography:** A biography is a collection of essays on the lives, events, and times of individuals. They are arranged alphabetically. It is a written account of a person’s life or the history of the lives of persons as a branch of literature.
- **Index:** These are systematic guides to the location of words, concepts, and other items in books, periodicals, or other publications. An index indicates the positions of required information. It does not provide complete information on a subject but indicates where to find it, including the page number, author, title, and subject.
- **Encyclopedia:** These are literary works containing extensive information on all branches of knowledge, usually arranged in alphabetical order, and are composed of individual articles arranged systematically. An encyclopedia brings together facts and information across all aspects of human knowledge into a single work. The basic purpose of an encyclopedia is to gather information spread over the globe; to lay out its general system to the men with whom we live, and to transfer it to those who will come after us (Diderot, 2015, cited in Akanwa and Udo-Anyanwu, 2017).
- **Atlas:** An atlas is a bound collection of maps. It can also be a collection of pictures illustrating any subject. Atlas provides articles describing each political division or boundary. There are several special maps, some showing climate, rainfall, vegetation, mineral resources, as well as geographical information about countries, mountains, rivers, and seas. Examples are: Atlas of Africa, World Atlas, and Biblical Atlas.
- **Directory:** A directory is a book that enables a person to locate, identify, and obtain the names and addresses of persons, organizations, or institutions. The scope of a directory can be restricted to a town, district, local government area, state, ethnic group, country or could cover the whole world.
- **Almanac:** An almanac is a book that contains several useful current data and statistics, activities, and the like. Information about what happens in society, arranged chronologically, is documented in almanacs. They are published yearly. According to Okwu (2021), an almanac is a book of facts and figures, often arranged in tables, charts, or lists, for quick reference.
- **Handbook:** A handbook is a handy compendium containing concise facts and figures on a particular subject or institution, organization, or country. It is a collection of diverse facts arranged in order on a subject or particular theme. Buttressing the above statement is Ibenne (2018), who affirmed that handbooks contain mostly facts that are not expected to change quickly and are therefore not updated annually.
- **Gazetteer:** A gazetteer is a history of geographical places. It gives location, history, statistics, culture, and other relevant information about places (Obi, 2013). It

is a geographical dictionary that provides information and dates on places, including towns, villages, rivers, mountains, lakes, and other geographical features, as well as population, longitude, and latitude.

- **Bibliography:** It is a list of information resources with their bibliographic details (author, date, title, place of publication, publishers, and edition). Akanwa and Udo-Anyanwu (2017) stated that it is an organized list of books, periodicals, journals, articles, reports, and conference papers, concerned with a given subject or a wide range of subjects, and generally arranged alphabetically by author, chronologically, or by topic.
- **Yearbook:** A yearbook, also known as an annual book, is a publication issued once a year that contains current, variable information in brief descriptive and/or statistical form. Yearbooks frequently summarize the events of the year. They frequently record general information about government, politics, the economy, and geography.
- **Abstract:** An abstract is a brief summary of a publication or article. In simple but meaningful terms, an abstract is a concise and accurate representation of the content of a document in a style similar to that of the original document. It is the accurate representation of a document in a small form.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study used quantitative and qualitative approaches within a descriptive research design. This technique was deemed acceptable since it allowed the researchers to gather and evaluate numerical data properly in order to define the nature of the library's reference services and sources. The study population was drawn from the total number of library staff at Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library, which, according to personnel data from the university library as of 2025, stands at 35. The sample of this study was 13 library staff (para-professionals and professional librarians) from the university library stated above.

The study adopted a judgmental sampling technique, as consideration was given only to para-professionals and professional librarians, as they are the core service providers in the library. Data was collected using an Observational Inventory. Amadi (2020) stated that an observational inventory is a structured guide that assists a researcher in attentively observing and documenting what occurs in a real-world setting (such as a classroom, library, or playground). The observational inventory was deemed acceptable for this study because it allowed the researchers to collect firsthand, objective data on the availability of reference sources, services, and service delivery techniques in the library context. Unlike self-

reported instruments, the observational technique reduced respondent bias while ensuring accurate capture of existing facilities and procedures.

The observational inventory used in this study was developed by the researchers following a thorough review of the relevant literature on reference services and sources in university libraries. The instrument was designed to align with the study's specific aims. It included structured elements divided into four categories that covered: (i) types of reference sources available, (ii) types of reference services given, (iii) methods of service delivery, and (iv) difficulties in reference service delivery. Each component included observable indicators, with answer options formatted as Yes/No to facilitate quantitative analysis. During the observation period, qualitative insights were gained in addition to quantitative data from the observational inventory.

The instrument was properly filled during the allotted period of two (2) months. The two-month data collection period was deemed acceptable to allow for adequate, repeated observation of library operations, ensuring the data's consistency and dependability. This period also helps to capture typical service patterns while reducing the potential of temporal bias associated with short-term monitoring. The data collected for this study were analyzed using frequency count and percentage.

III. STUDY RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the types of reference sources and reference services available at Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. The study further identified methods used to provide these services and the challenges involved in delivering reference services at Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library.

Types of Reference Sources Available

Table 1, on the following page, shows the types of reference sources available in Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. All the items have a percentage of yes above the 50% benchmark. This indicates that, the types of reference sources available at the Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library include: abstract, almanac, atlas, bibliography, biography, dictionary, directory, encyclopedia, gazetteer, handbook, index, and yearbook.

Table 1: Types of reference sources available¹

S/N	Item	Available	Not Available	Decision
1	Abstract	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
2	Almanac	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
3	Atlas	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
4	Bibliography	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
5	Biography	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
6	Dictionary	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
7	Directory	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
8	Encyclopaedia	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
9	Gazetteer	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
10	Handbook	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
11	Index	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
12	Yearbook	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available

Types of Reference Services Available

Table 2 shows the types of reference services available in Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. All the items have a percentage of yes above the 50% benchmark. This indicates that the types of reference services available include: compilation of bibliography, current awareness services, user education, inter-library loan, selective dissemination of information, referral, abstracting, and indexing.

Table 2: Types of reference services available²

S/N	Service	Available	Not Available	Decision
1	Compilation of bibliography	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
2	Current Awareness Services	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
3	User Education	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
4	Inter-Library Loan	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
5	Selective Dissemination of Information	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
6	Referral Service	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
7	Abstracting Service	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available
8	Indexing Service	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Available

Methods used for the provision of Reference Services

Table 3 shows the methods used to provide reference services at Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. As indicated in the table, only items 21, 22, 24, and 25 have a yes percentage above the 50% benchmark. This indicates that face-to-face, email reference, telephone conference, and online chat reference are the methods used for the provision of reference services.

Table 3: Methods used for the provision of reference services³

S/N	Method	Yes	No	Decision
1	Face-to-face	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Yes
2	Email	10 (77%)	3 (23%)	Yes
3	Chatbot	0 (0%)	13 (100%)	No
4	Phone	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	Yes
5	Online Chat	11 (84%)	2 (16%)	Yes
6	Video Conference	2 (16%)	11 (84%)	No

¹ Source: Field Data² Source: Field Data³ Source: Field Survey

Challenges confronting the delivery of Reference Services

Table 4 shows the challenges confronting the delivery of reference services in Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. As indicated in the table, only items 29, 30, and 31 have a yes percentage above the 50% benchmark. This indicates that lack of ICT skills, inadequate ICT facilities, and poor internet connectivity are the challenges confronting the delivery of reference services.

Table 4: Challenges confronting the delivery of reference services⁴

S/N	Challenge	Yes	No	Decision
1	Inadequate reference sources	5 (38%)	8 (62%)	No
2	Power failure	3 (23%)	10 (77%)	No
3	Lack of ICT skills	8 (61%)	5 (39%)	Yes
4	Inadequate ICT facilities	9 (69%)	4 (31%)	Yes
5	Poor internet connectivity	6 (46%)	7 (54%)	Yes

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings in Table 1 indicate that the types of reference sources available in Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library include: abstract, almanac, atlas, bibliography, biography, dictionary, directory, encyclopedia, gazetteer, handbook, index, and yearbook. The finding of this study is in line with Ayanlola (2017), who stated that adequate reference sources, such as biographies, indexes, encyclopedias, atlases, directories, and abstracts, should be made available for use. When reference sources are made available in good numbers, research is improved. This is also consistent with the stance taken by Akanwa and Udo-Anyanwu (2017), who emphasized that a well-developed reference collection must include a variety of information resources to efficiently satisfy users' informational needs. Similarly, Obi (2013) observed that the availability of a variety of reference sources improves users' ability to obtain accurate, specialized information effectively.

Aside from the quantitative evidence, qualitative observations from the two-month research period provide further insight into the practical use and relevance of the accessible reference materials. Users regularly access fundamental reference resources such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, and directories, especially for rapid information retrieval and concept clarification. This demonstrates not just their availability, but also their functional importance in addressing consumers' urgent information requirements. Irrespective of the availability of different reference sources, certain resources, such as yearbooks, gazetteers, as well as specialist bibliographies, were frequently overlooked. This shows a potential gap between availability and user understanding or information literacy, since many users tended to choose known and easily available resources.

The finding of table 2 indicates that, the types of reference services available in Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library include: compilation of bibliography, current awareness services, user education, inter-library lone services, selective dissemination of information, referral service, abstracting service and indexing service. This finding agrees with Sadiku et al. (2018) who affirmed that academic libraries cannot function adequately without rendering reference services such as; referral service, abstracting service and indexing service and current awareness services. Okwu (2021) underlined that services such as selective dissemination of information, current awareness services and inter-library borrowing are critical for keeping users up to date on current advancements in their fields of study. Akor and Alhassan (2015) contended that good reference services improve user happiness and academic performance by directing users to relevant information sources.

In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative observations from the two-month field engagement gave a better understanding of how reference services are given in practice at Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. Bibliography compilation and referral services were among the most popular activities at the reference desk, particularly for students working on project writing and research tasks. Librarians were frequently seen assisting users in locating relevant materials, illustrating the enduring value of human-mediated reference service.

The findings in Table 3 indicate face-to-face, email reference, telephone conference, and online chat reference as the methods used for the provision of reference services in Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. This finding corroborates with Ayanlola (2017),

⁴ Source: Field Survey

who discovered that practically all libraries provide reference services with face-to-face consultation, over the phone, and in a lot of libraries, you may email your reference queries, or request a reference librarian who will e-mail you back with the solutions. Ibenne (2018) mentioned that underlined that current reference services are progressively combining physical and technological communication channels to improve user accessibility and convenience. Egunjobi et al. (2022) stated that the use of digital reference tools, such as email and online chat services, is becoming increasingly important for meeting users' changing information needs in university libraries.

Throughout the research period, qualitative observations suggested that face-to-face reference services remained the dominant and most commonly utilized type of service delivery. Users were often seen accessing the reference desk for direct assistance, notably with identifying resources, understanding catalogue information, and refining research questions. This shows that, despite the availability of digital technologies, the old human model of reference service continues to play an important role in user assistance.

The findings in Table 4 indicate a lack of ICT skills, inadequate ICT facilities, and poor internet connectivity as the challenges confronting the delivery of reference services in Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. The finding is supported by Ali (2020), who opines that lack of ICT skills and inadequate ICT facilities are the major challenges facing the implementation of reference services delivery in Nigerian libraries. As a result, libraries still hold on to the ancient ways of providing services in the reference section. According to Okwu (2021), many university libraries continue to struggle with fully integrating ICT into reference services due to inadequate infrastructure and technical capability. Ibenne (20218) stressed that the efficacy of current reference services is strongly reliant on librarians' ICT skills and the availability of dependable digital infrastructure.

Throughout the two-month study period, qualitative observations gave a deeper understanding of the problems

influencing reference service delivery at Dame Patience Jonathan Academic Library. Librarians regularly reported problems acquiring reliable internet connectivity, especially when attempting to use online resources or assist users with digital concerns. These disruptions frequently hampered service delivery and reduced the efficacy of ICT-based reference contacts.

V. CONCLUSION

Reference service is one of the most professional parts of librarianship that any aspiring librarian must understand. These services are frequently provided in academic libraries with the goal of advising library clients on the most relevant library materials to peruse. By addressing the challenges associated with reference services in academic libraries and leveraging the available prospects for improvement, libraries can enhance the effectiveness, efficiency, and user satisfaction of their reference services. These efforts will contribute to supporting academic success, fostering information literacy, and facilitating research and scholarship within the academic community.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study outcomes, the following recommendations are put forward:

- Academic libraries ought to lean towards the introduction of other methods of reference service provision that have yet to be established.
- University libraries should, like other organizations, establish a private libraries' website, create online spaces wherein users can engage with an actual human librarian or chatbots, and maximize their social media accounts.
- Libraries should prioritize educational and development initiatives to equip reference librarians with the needed.

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