An Analytical Study of Masters Dissertations on the Balme Library, University of Ghana, Legon

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Abstract
This paper analyses masters dissertations written on the Balme Library, University of Ghana by students of the Department of Information Studies, University of Ghana from 1998-2005, with a view to ascertaining how the management of Balme Library has implemented the recommendations from the dissertations. The analysis takes the form of the type and year of dissertation, subject of dissertation, and whether written by Balme Library staff or not. The findings indicate that most of the recommendations in the dissertations have not been implemented by the library. One of the reasons for this is that the Balme Library did not even know of the findings and recommendations. Some suggestions have been made to overcome this problem, including the need for staff of the Balme Library to supervise some of such dissertations or, failing this, and/or the need for the management of the library to, at least, be made aware of studies and recommendations relating to the Balme Library.

Introduction
The dissertation is an essential aspect of masters degrees in a number of library and information schools throughout the world, including the Department of Information Studies at the University of Ghana. The goals of a dissertation are to meet the requirements of a degree, proving that one has mastered the skills necessary to succeed in one's chosen scholarly field, while at the same time, making an original contribution to that field (Duke and Beck, 1999).

The number of dissertations written each year in the department has grown steadily in the past five years. Similarly, a lot of interest has been developed by masters' students on the activities of the Balme Library, University of Ghana.

The subject of the dissertation is crucial. It is the main core of the work and therefore has to be chosen with a lot of care and attention. The Balme Library has been a subject of attention by masters' students of the Department of Information Studies in recent years. It is the main library of the University of Ghana, Legon. Balme Library is the largest library in Ghana. It has a stock of about 350,000 volumes and 5,000 periodical titles. It was built to accommodate 250,000 volumes and 350 readers. But at the moment, university expansion has meant that the library is now expected to serve over 17,000 potential readers, made up of students (undergraduate and postgraduate), faculty, the administration and the general university community. There are different departments within the library and each department has its specific role. They are: Administrative Department, Orders and Acquisition Department, Cataloguing Department, Reader Services Department, Technical Services Department and the Computer Unit (Alemna and Cobblah, 2004).

For students of the Department of Information Studies, University of Ghana, the Balme Library thus provides the following advantages: easy access, extensive collections, large facilities, large number of professional staff and increased electronic information provision.
Review of Relevant Literature

In most universities the life cycle of a thesis/dissertation begins with the conception of a researchable topic by a graduate student in consultation with a supervisor or a potential supervisor. Upon agreement, the student is normally requested to develop a research proposal under the supervision of an academic staff member within the relevant department. The proposal is then presented in an oral presentation at a seminar convened by the department where other members and experts in the field often participate. Comments are made, and the candidate is requested to reflect on them before submitting the proposal for approval to the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee as pertains at the Universities of Dar-es-Salaam, Makerere and others (Kiondo, 2004). At the University of Ghana, there are three stages in the approval of theses and dissertations. The first stage involves the approval of the research proposal for the intended topic, by the Department. Then, it has to be approved by the Faculty Committee before it is submitted to the Academic Board for final approval.

Theses and dissertations as requirements for masters' degrees have become controversial in recent times. There is an on-going debate as to whether it is necessary to present a thesis or dissertation in order to obtain a master's degree. The arguments include that: (a) the nature of thesis is incompatible with the nature of so many disciplines presently requiring it as part of the curriculum; (b) at best, the majority of theses are insignificant as contributions to their disciplines especially so in terms of their cost in time, harassment, and money to the candidate and in time and harassment to the faculty involved; (c) many “good” schools are doing away with thesis (presumably for good reasons); (d) students are not prepared educationally or equipped intellectually to “write” a coherent, readable thesis; (e) the time spent by the candidate on thesis could be spent more profitably in additional coursework better preparing the candidate professionally; and (f) once theses are approved, bound, and shelved, nobody ever reads them.

These arguments, and there are no doubt others, have validity. Too often, however, the negative thrust of these arguments is allowed to go unchallenged. There are persuasive points to be made on the other side of the question (Schwarz, 1973). The dissertation is the first expression of maturity in and mastery of a field. It is therefore of a special importance to the candidate and the institution. For most institutions, it is the best instrumentality by which to measure the candidate’s preparedness, ambition and accomplishment. It is also the last important exercise that students will do in their graduate careers. For the candidate, the dissertation also provides an opportunity to produce something of original value or conception, to an extent, independently of coursework. It also enhances the research and writing skills of the candidate. The idea of literature review also enables the candidate to have a broad view of the whole gamut of literature in the chosen subject, from which to select relevant ideas.

Another advantage of the dissertation is the analytical and critical thinking that it provides in the analysis of findings and recommendations. This allows the candidate to exercise his/her analytical skills as well as marshal coherent arguments in making conclusions and recommendations. It may be pertinent also to mention here that the process of seminar presentations before a topic is finally accepted allows for some level of peer review and lessons in academic presentations which might be carried over to the candidate’s future jobs after leaving the library school. Although one might argue that dissertations are not necessary or required for certain masters’ programmes, it is the view of the present researchers that for the library and information profession, writing of dissertations should be encouraged. In the view of Schwarz (1973), “to focus on the product of dissertations and to judge it entirely in terms of its usefulness, originality, or its contribution to the field, is to misunderstand its primary function – that of the culminating event in a particular educational process.” It is important that the dissertation becomes an integral part of the masters’ student’s education and professional training. It should be informed by a comprehensive knowledge of the field gained in formal training, and it should demonstrate the student’s capacity for significant professional performance beyond graduation. The dissertation should be publishable or a source of publishable material (Lang, 2002).

The argument that students are not yet prepared to produce scholarship of sufficient quality to be published is a curious one, since their work will be subject to the same rigours of peer review as everyone else’s (Olson and Drew, 1998). What is
expected is a better supervision of graduate students through effective mentorship so that they learn how to produce rigorous scholarship.

Objective of the Study

The content of a dissertation is often limited to an account of a particular research and for a particular audience. In the past seven years, the Department of Information Studies of the University of Ghana has produced a number of masters’ dissertations whose contents and target audience relate to the Balme Library. This paper analysed the contents of these dissertations, with a view to investigating whether the findings have been known, accepted and implemented by the library.

The aim of a research is to introduce new ideas and try to implement these ideas to solve problems. A major significance of this study, therefore, is to ensure that findings are implemented to provide some solutions for the Balme Library’s problems. It is also expected that this will motivate other libraries on which students have based their dissertation topics to obtain and analyse those dissertations and try to implement some of the good recommendations. The study was limited to only dissertations that focused specifically on the Balme Library. Therefore, comparative studies of the Balme Library with other libraries, or those that focused on academic libraries in general, were excluded.

Methodology

All dissertations relating to the Balme Library, University of Ghana, from 1998-2005, were selected from the Department of Information Studies and the Balme Library. The year 1998 was chosen as the benchmark because it was the year that the Department commenced the masters’ degree programme thus replacing the graduate diploma programme. In all, 13 dissertations were covered (11 M.A. and 2 M.Phil.). Each dissertation was analysed in terms of type and year of dissertation and whether the author was a staff of Balme Library or not.

Findings

Table 1 gives the distribution of both M.A. and M.Phil. dissertations over the period covered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>M.A.</th>
<th>M.Phil.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fewer dissertations at the M.Phil. level is understandable because fewer students pursue M.Phil. degrees, and therefore a smaller number would present dissertations on the Balme Library. Two years (1998 and 2003) recorded the highest productivity of dissertations on the library. By contrast, no dissertation was undertaken on the Balme Library in 2001 and 2002.

Subject of Dissertation

Table 2 shows the distribution of the subject-matter of the various dissertations presented on the Balme Library. With the exception of collection development and library security which have two dissertations each, the rest show an even distribution of single works. The table also shows the diverse subjects covered by the dissertations.

Analysing the dissertations on the basis of the relationship of the authors to the Balme Library reveals in table 3 that non-Balme Library staff outnumbered Balme Library staff in the presentation of dissertations.
Table 2: Subject of Dissertation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Subject of Dissertation</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Customer satisfaction</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Disaster management</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Human resource management</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Services to the physically challenged</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Total quality management</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Dissertations by Balme Library and non-Balme Library Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Staff of the Balme Library</th>
<th>Non-Staff of the Balme Library</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows that in 1998 and 2003 equal number of Balme Library staff and non-Balme Library staff presented dissertations on the Balme Library. However, in 1999, two Balme Library staff presented two dissertations on the library, but there were no dissertation by non-Balme Library Staff. In 2000, 2004 and 2005, there were single presentations by non-Balme Library staff. The years 2001 and 2002 recorded no dissertation on the Balme Library. Overall, the table shows that non-Balme Library staff outnumbered Balme Library staff in the presentation of dissertations on the library.

Recommendations Related to the Balme Library

One of the major aims of every dissertation is to make recommendations relating to the subject of study. In the case of the Balme Library, the following is a summary of the recommendations that were made by the masters' students during the years covered by the study:

- **Collection management**
  1. There is the need for the teaching faculty to take an active part in the selection of materials for the library. This had not been so for a long time as most faculties did not appear to have the time to help in this area.
  2. The Balme Library should approve donations coming from outside before they are sent to the library so as not to receive unwanted materials.
  3. The Balme Library should link up with the alumni to donate materials to the library. This will help to solve the problem of lack of materials.
  4. The Balme Library should have a collection management policy.
  5. Periodic stock-taking exercise should be undertaken by the Library.
  6. The weeding of materials should be done more regularly and systematically in order to ensure that the materials are current.

- **Customer satisfaction**
  1. Suggestion boxes should be placed in the library for users to make suggestions for the improvement of the Library.
  2. The encouragement of the use of private photocopiers in the library should be considered seriously.
  3. The Balme Library should aim at the improvement of inter-library lending services.
  4. Training in customer service for library staff should be carried out on a regular basis.
  5. Frequent surveys on customer satisfaction should be conducted by the Library.
Disaster management
1. There is the need for a disaster-preparedness plan for the Balme Library.
2. Training in fire-fighting for library staff should form part of the training for disaster management.
3. Acquisition of fire extinguishers for the library should be seriously considered.
4. Replacement of old electrical fittings in the library should be done regularly.
5. There should be more emergency exits in the library.

User guidance systems
1. The Library should have floor-directional signs to guide users to materials.
2. There should be more visibility for the library through the use of newsletters, library bulletins, open days, and library guides.

Human resource development
1. In-service training for all library staff should be done periodically.
2. There is the need for quarterly staff meetings to promote a healthy atmosphere in the library.
3. A proper scheduling of leave rosters should be carried out to ensure that adequate number of staff would always be around at any point in time to serve users.

Income generation
1. The Library should adopt more innovative ways of generating income.
2. The use of the computer laboratory to generate income should be seriously considered by the Library.
3. The University administration should be persuaded to release the library budget promptly in order to enable the library meet its commitments.
4. There should be a more judicious use of the library's financial resources to avoid waste.

Library automation
1. There is the need to fully automate the university library system.
2. More computers should be provided for the functioning of the library.
3. The Library should have more CD-ROM workstations to serve its numerous users.
4. Frequent training should be organised for staff to be more computer literate.

Library security
1. It is important to display mutilated library materials so as to deter others from mutilating materials.
2. Seminars on library security for staff and library users should be organised occasionally.
3. Screening of present and future library security employees is necessary to weed out inappropriate staff.
4. The use of staff identification badges should be encouraged so that offending staff could be properly reported.
5. There is the need to acquire a stand-by generator for the library to avoid power outages during opening hours.
6. The Library should carry out the enforcement of disciplinary measures against deviant behaviours.
7. A more liberal lending policy should be put in place to allow more materials to be borrowed than is currently the case.
8. There is the need to acquire an electronic theft detection system to detect thefts in the library.
9. The Library should employ and train its own security personnel rather than use personnel from the University Security Service who are not reliable and serious with their work.
10. A regular surveillance of readers using security cameras should be carried out.
11. A security evaluation team for the library should be established to evaluate the security situation from time-to-time.

Services to the physically challenged
1. Resource persons at the Braille Library must be absorbed into the University system.
2. There should be provision of more space in the library for the physically challenged.
3. The library building should be modified to
provide easy access for the physically challenged.

- **Total quality management**
  1. Team building should be encouraged to ensure employees' involvement in team work in the Library.
  2. The Balme Library Mission Statement should be made available to all the employees.
  3. The need to extend the library building should be considered so as to cater for the ever increasing number of users.
  4. A more comprehensive evaluation of services should be carried out periodically.
  5. All staff must understand the need for change in order to improve upon services.
  6. The need to strengthen library-faculty relations is long overdue.

- **User education**
  1. A compulsory user education programme for all freshers in the University should be introduced.
  2. Faculty should be seriously involved in user-education.
  3. There is the need for the inclusion of on-line user-education programmes.
  4. A systematic evaluation scheme for the user-education programme should be in place.
  5. There is the need for a more comprehensive programme of user-education for the Balme Library.

**Recommendations Already Carried out by Balme Library**

The study also sets out to determine which of the recommendations made in the dissertations had so far been carried out, so as to know those that are outstanding. The following are the recommendations that have been implemented:

- **Collection management**
  1. The library, through the University Alumni Office, has developed links with the Alumni in and out of the country, who are providing materials for the library.
  2. Recently, the Acquisitions Department has linked up with the teaching faculty to assist in the selection of materials for the library.
  3. With the impending automation of the library, a new collection development policy is being prepared.

- **Customer satisfaction**
  1. With the constant complaints of users (formally and informally) to library staff, a suggestion box has been placed in the library and this is well patronised.
  2. With the provision of electronic services in all the university libraries in the country, a renewed attention has been placed on inter-library lending.

- **Disaster management**
  1. Based on the advice of the Ghana National Fire Service, fire-extinguishers have been acquired for the library.
  2. The Ghana National Fire Service is now in a position to conduct fire-fighting training.
  3. The new extensions to the library building have made provisions for emergency exits.

- **User guidance systems**
  1. Library publicity has been intensified with the use of the University intranet system and the *University Reporter*.

- **Human resource development**
  1. The first stage of in-service training has been done for the library assistants and messengers. This will be an on-going training to cover other staff.

- **Income generation**
  1. Fee-paying training programmes are now being organised at the computer laboratory to generate income. This is mostly done during the holidays when the laboratory is less used.

- **Library automation**
  1. The library is undergoing a full-scale automation of all its services. This is through...
a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

2. There has been an increase in the number of computers in the past two years, as a result of the automation process in the library.

3. On-going training in computer literacy is being provided for the staff, so as to get them ready to function in the new automated system.

Library security
1. A stand-by generator has been acquired by the library to solve the problem of power outages when the library is open.

2. The library automation system includes an electronic detection system which will help to curtail the loss of materials in the library.

3. There has been more enforcement of disciplinary measures in the past years relating to both staff and students who do not abide by library regulations.

Services to the physically challenged
1. Resource persons at the Braille Library have been absorbed into the University system. They are therefore now considered as full-time staff of the library.

2. The new library extension makes provision for more rooms for the physically challenged.

Total quality management
1. Team building has been encouraged in the library through delegation of authority and consensus building in decision-making.

2. There is an extension to the library building. Although there is a delay in the completion of the extension, it is hoped that this would be completed soon.

3. Efforts are being made to strengthen library-faculty relations. Teaching faculty has been invited for training programmes in the library especially in the area of the use of e-resources.

User education
1. Initially, the use of on-line databases is part of the user-education programme for fresh postgraduate students.

It may be pertinent to mention here that, the implementation of most of these recommendations was more coincidental to the findings, than purposive.

Summary and Recommendations

It can be seen from the findings of this study that the Balme Library has been unable to carry out most of the recommendations relating to the library in the past seven years. Out of a total summary of 54 recommendations, only 23 or less than half have been implemented.

A number of reasons can be given for the poor implementation of these recommendations. First of all, the library is often not aware of these findings, as there is no coordination between the Balme Library and the Department of Information Studies with regards to the selection of dissertation topics and the supervision of dissertations. Secondly, though some of the masters' students were sponsored from the Balme Library, they either did not write on topics relating to the library, or even when they did, most of them did not see to the implementation of their own recommendations. Thirdly, some of the recommendations, such as those on income generation, disaster management, service to the physically challenged and library security, border more on university-wide policy decisions and not library-specific policies.

It is thus recommended that the Department of Information Studies should get the Balme Library staff to know about topics being written on the library. If this is done, the recommendations could be implemented by library management. Ideally, the Balme Library staff should be encouraged to supervise such topics as they know the library better. However, care should be taken in order not to allow the Balme Library staff who supervise such dissertations to unduly influence the findings.

Also, the Balme Library should insist that students who are sponsored from the library to the Department of Information Studies and who write on topics relating to the Library be made to present seminars on their findings, so that their recommendations could be properly discussed and implemented.

Conclusion

This work has provided a very good lesson on the weaknesses of the Balme Library. A number of the recommendations by the students actually denote the
right situation in the library. However, it must be pointed out that previous experience has shown that one of the recommendations dealing with the exhibition of mutilated materials was implemented decades ago. However, it led to more mutilation in the library. It is expected that most of the outstanding recommendations that could easily be implemented would be carried out soon. It is also envisaged that, from now on, the library would pay more attention to dissertation topics that have bearings on the functioning and management of the library by following up on such dissertations. In this way, efforts could be made to know and implement the useful recommendations of these dissertations.

References


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