

Information Commons: A Service Model for Academic Libraries in Kenya

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Abstract

The changing information landscape in today's library environment has compelled libraries to shift from the conventional library service models to new service models. One of the new service models is Information Commons which is being embraced to satisfy the changing needs and demands by the current generation for technology-oriented services and products. This chapter explores the concept of Information Commons, describes its features and assesses the extent to which academic libraries in Kenya have transformed their physical spaces to Information Commons. This study on which this chapter is based was exploratory and adopted a mixed-methods research design. Data was collected from 30 librarians in six universities using face-to-face interviews and observation. 73% of librarians are familiar with the concept of Information Commons; no university has established an Information Commons; and various aspects of the Information Commons model exist but in fragmented form. Information Commons model is a promising and tenable solution to the challenge of academic libraries offering relevant services and facilities. This study offers insights in the design and composition of an Information Commons in academic libraries. Information Commons is still a novel idea to libraries in Kenya and therefore the results of this study adds to the general knowledge on this model and contextualises its implementation to academic libraries in Kenya.

Keywords: *Information Commons, Library Service Models, Academic Libraries, Kenya, Library Transformations*

1 Introduction

The increased use of technology as a way of accessing information and the change towards collaborative learning and group study have brought changes in the way the current generation of students use libraries and the resources therein. The majority of today's patrons in academic libraries are the Millennial or X generation (those born from 1982-1995) and Generation Z or 'I' Generation (those born from mid-1990s to late 2000s). The attributes of these generations have directly influenced the many changes that academic libraries are going through. MacWhinnie (2013) notes that libraries are transforming their services and physical spaces to satisfy the changing needs and demands by the current generation for technology-oriented services and products. These changes have led to emergence of Information Commons (ICs) model, which MacWhinnie defines as "a new type of physical facility specifically designed to organise workspace and service delivery around an integrated digital environment" (p. 244). In addition, academic libraries have redefined their services to provide self-service and checkout counters, single points to access information stations, cafes, and other physical makeovers to improve the library's significance (Thachill, 2014). Nagy (2011) indicated that many academic libraries in the developed countries have expanded their roles in their communities and bought in the "learning café model by providing discussion areas and non-structured work spaces with cosy seating and group study areas with appropriate technological support" (p. 10), which he refers to as Information Commons. Information Commons can therefore be defined as a space in a library that has been redesigned bringing together pervasive technology, content and services designed around social construction of knowledge and equipped with up-to-date technologies.

Another factor influencing academic library's physical makeover is the change toward group learning brought about by an emphasis on collaboration and group study modes of learning. This is causing demand for facilities that allow group study and incorporate technology for accessing both the physical collection and electronic resources in addition to offering the necessary software that allows students to collaborate to complete shared assignments (Jamali, Abbaszadeh, Ebrahimi & Maleki, 2011). Despite the Information Commons model being in existence for over two decades and promising to be a tenable solution to the challenge of academic libraries offering relevant services and facilities, little attention in research has been given to offer insights on how this model can be implemented in academic libraries in Kenya.

The aim of the study leading to this chapter was to explore the Information Commons model as it has been implemented in academic libraries in Kenya. The specific objectives of the study were to describe the features of Information Commons model in libraries; determine the extent to which academic libraries in Kenya have transformed their physical spaces to Information Commons; and identify gaps in the implementation of Information Commons model so as to offer recommendations to optimise the new service model. The findings of the study may assist librarians when configuring

the Information Commons to leverage the value of the available content, technology and the physical setting so as to engage and support the academics and students' learning lifestyle.

2 Information Commons Service Model

The concept of the Information Commons also known as the Information Arcade, the Information Hub, Media Union, or Learning Commons) was developed in the 1990s (Heitsch & Holley, 2011). The conception of the Information Commons model was based on the framework of Learning Centers in United Kingdom, which were physical and virtual spaces dedicated to learning and studying (Beagle, 1999). The Physical Commons consists of the computer hardware, furnishings, designated spaces, and traditional collections of the library, while the Virtual Commons contains of the digital library collections, online tools, electronic learning tools, and Web presence of the library (Heitsch & Holley, 2011). Even though there is no single definition of an Information Commons, it can be seen as a convergence of library programmes, services and facilities enabled by technology for teaching, learning and research.

Information Commons model reinforces the social aspects of learning, offers abundant technology and digital content, and provides students with a physical setting that is often available 24–7 (Lippincott, 2012). The Information Commons model provides service desks staffed by individuals from both the library and Information Technology units (Lippincott, 2012). They provide redefined library spaces with fixtures such as table lamps as well as lounge furniture including comfortable couches and chairs (Aiani, 2015). The model provides a library environment that promotes both silent and social communal study (Heitsch & Holley, 2011). Programmes such as writing assistance, peer and professional tutoring, basic technology assistance, special assistance on more complicated technology projects, are provided at convenient times to Commons' users (Sheikh, 2015). The definition of Information Commons includes being responsive to new technologies. Therefore, such spaces have to be technologically rich so as to provide the requisite technologies for teaching, learning and research (Santos, Ali & Hill, 2016).

The primary focus of an Information Commons is technology: tools to complete class assignments, conduct research, acquire information, and synthesise and create knowledge. Computers, scanners, printers, digital and video cameras, teleconferencing equipment, e-book readers, and much more are all at the centre of the Information Commons philosophy (MacWhinnie, 2013). A secondary but equally important emphasis is space for collaborative work: group study rooms, large tables, classrooms, and groupings of comfortable seating. Today's generation of students more often than not want to work in pairs or groups, whether as part of a class assignment, studying for an exam, or just doing homework. This tendency is facilitated by the collaborative spaces typical of the Information Commons (Seal, 2012).

The Information Commons model has become a convincing solution to new challenges experienced in libraries (Pacios, 2015). They have increasingly become the premiere strategy for libraries to meet the multifaceted needs of the new generation of users, and continue to evolve to meet the changing demands in technology and learning theory (Accardi, Cordova & Leeder, 2010). The new spaces established or transformed to be Information Commons in university libraries are wildly popular with students and if a library does not have one, chances are that it is planning for one (Spencer, 2006). Information Commons offer a range of benefits which include seamless and ready access to information resources, software, and hardware needed to create knowledge; flexible spaces both formal and informal which adapt to students' differing learning styles; and the opportunity to interact with both fellow classmates, professors, and librarians, all of whom contribute significantly to their education.

3 Rationale and Context of the Study

The changing information landscape in today's library environment has compelled libraries to shift from the conventional library service models to rethink new service models. The emergence of digital information resources, new educational pedagogies, technological advancements and evolving student research needs have obliged academic libraries to transform their physical spaces by adopting a new service delivery model referred to as Information Commons.

Since the conceptualisation of Information Commons in 1990s, it has continued to evolve. Developed countries have employed it and advanced it in the form of 'learning commons' (Heitsch & Holley, 2011). Sharma (2011) noted that academic libraries in Kenya have not embraced Information Commons and hoped that they would embark on this service model as it was the trend internationally for future libraries. However, seven or so years later it is still a novel idea with no known research on the area. A literature search on Information Commons in libraries in Kenya produces no results. This shows that despite the model being in existence for over two decades, university libraries in Kenya are lagging behind in implementing the model. Although the term 'Information Commons' was not found to be used in existing literature on university libraries in Kenya, the salient features describing the Information Commons have been explored by several researchers (Kwanya, Stilwell, & Underwood, 2012; Makori, 2009; Musangi, 2014). Findings from these studies show that discussion rooms, digital collections, technology-enriched services and spaces are provided in university libraries in Kenya.

Despite the central role played by Information Commons in today's libraries, less research has been done on the extent of implementation of this service model in university libraries in Kenya. Therefore, this study was conducted to fill in this gap. The study was done among fully-fledged universities in Kenya, with an aim to explore how the libraries have implemented the Information Commons model.

4 Methodology

This study used a mixed-method research design because it sought to explore the Information Commons in the context of university libraries in Kenya against the established standards of an Information Commons model.

Data was collected through observation and face-to-face interviews with 30 librarians and 25 focus groups of students. Since Information Commons model is physical in nature, observation was also used to identify the specific features of the model as it exists in the universities. An observation checklist on Information Commons features developed based on existing literature on defining Information Commons (Aiani, 2015) and on redefining the future of academic libraries (Seal, 2012) was used to assess the extent of implementation of this model. The interviews were guided by an interview schedule about the Information Commons, specifically on the level of understanding of Information Commons, presence of Information Commons and key service elements present in the libraries.

The target population included the libraries of the chartered universities in Kenya and ranked by webometrics in July 2015. In this respect, the website for webometric ranking was consulted and details of all such universities were gathered which were 37 in number. The study purposively sampled six universities (the three top-ranked public and three private). This was done with the assumption that the characteristics of an Information Commons model, which are technologically-rich environment and networked information resources contributed to the rank attained by the sampled universities.

5 Results of Study

The findings of the study are presented in this section based on the objectives of the study.

5.1 Level of understanding of Information Commons concept

Many experts and scholars have different interpretations of Information Commons. This study therefore sought to assess the understanding of the Information Commons concept among librarians. A five-point scale was used and the respondents were asked to rate their familiarity level accordingly. Figure 1 presents the findings.

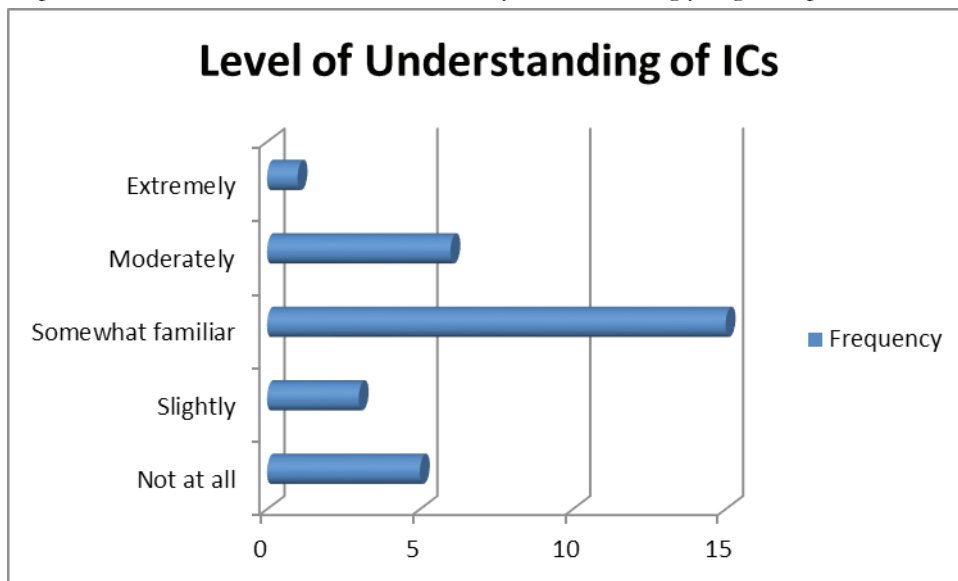


Figure 1: Understanding of the concept of Information Commons by librarians

Source: Research Data

The majority 73% (22) of the librarians were familiar with the concept of Information Commons, with 50% (15) of them rating their level of understanding as “somewhat familiar”. However, further probe on the concept showed that some librarians used the term interchangeably with ‘graduate commons’ and ‘research commons’ as this is what was observed to exist in the libraries.

5.2 Presence of Information Commons

To establish whether university libraries had set up Information Commons, the study found that no university had a facility or transformed the existing facility to an Information Commons. Two private university libraries have set up a graduate or research commons, as they called them. However, it was found that the libraries have implemented varied features of Information Commons model. Two private and one public university libraries had discussion rooms. The discussion rooms were in various sizes to accommodate smaller (see Figure 2) and large groups of users (see Figure 3).



Figure 2: Discussion room for small groups

Photo Credit: Penninah Musangi



Figure 3: Discussion room for large groups

Photo credit: Penninah Musangi

Noteworthy to mention was that the furniture in these rooms, which was different from the general reading area, provided an opportunity to the occupants to deliberate and share. It was observed that the location of these rooms was either at the top-most or basement floors of the library building. The librarians said that this enabled the users to conduct discussions without interrupting the quiet study areas. Interviews with the students revealed that Information Commons spaces were one of the most liked facilities in the library.

Another facility was instruction rooms where the librarians conducted information literacy (IL) trainings. The rooms were equipped with necessary infrastructure like networked desktop computers, white boards, projectors, WiFi and, in one library, there was a smart-board (see Figure 4). One of the respondents pointed out that the instruction rooms are important when conducting IL sessions as they do not need to look for venues far from the library. This enables them to train the library users at the place of need.



Figure 4: Smart-board

Photo credit: Penninah Musangi

In four universities, the furniture, especially the seating, had been transformed, fitted with cosy seats (see Figure 5) along glass-walled spaces. A probe on this revealed that the users use this area for relaxation especially when reading newspapers and they are placed along the wall to attract potential users in the library.



Figure 5: Cosy seating

Photo credit: Penninah Musangi

The reading tables in one university had provision of power and Internet connection ports (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Reading table fitted with Internet and power ports

Photo credit: Penninah Musangi

5.3 Key Information Commons model service elements

Information Commons service model integrates the physical and the virtual environment. To establish the presence of key service elements which define an Information Commons, an assessment was carried out using a checklist, the results are as shown in Table 1. All the university libraries were found to be offering technology service, user training and access service. None of them had a teaching centre, media service or collaboration between library and Information Technology Service (ITS). Two libraries had setup writing centres to train and assist in academic writing, two were offering research data service for analysis and archiving. Four libraries had workstations for collaboration to cater for both small and large groups, and also four libraries had transformed their information service desk strategically located as a centre for first link to users and offering reference and consulting service.

Table 1: Presence of key service elements in the six universities

Key ICs Service Element	Universities					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Collaboration between library & IT units	No	No	No	No	No	No
Media service	No	No	No	No	No	No
User training	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Writing centre	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Research data	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Workstations for collaboration (small and large groups)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Technology service	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Teaching centre	No	No	No	No	No	No
Access service	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Information service desk	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No

Source: Research Data

6 Discussions and Conclusions

University libraries are redefining Information Commons as a ‘place’ or ‘space’ within the library building (Sheikh, 2015). Librarians’ understanding of this concept shows that Information Commons is a novel idea to many although their familiarity negates what they labelled to be Information Commons. The respondents interviewed agree with Sheikh (2015) that Information Commons is a reengineered library space driven by the current generation of users who prefer a socially-connected environment, changes in learning, teaching and research philosophies as well as the emerging trends in technological developments. Despite the familiarity with the concept, all the libraries studied had not implemented the Information Commons model in its complete form.

Learning and teaching pedagogies are changing in higher education requiring libraries to transform, especially their spaces, to accommodate these emerging changes (Freeman, 2005) and support the new pedagogies which involve collaborative and interactive learning methods (Blumenthal, 2017). University libraries in Kenya have not been left behind. They have embraced these changes by creating discussion rooms where users can collaborate in their studies. Three participating university libraries had discussion rooms furnished with furniture (round reading tables and without partitions) for group work and sharing. This confirms the observation of Choy and Goh (2016) that there is a gradual shift in the focus of libraries from accommodation of collection to user spaces. They also advise that users require appropriately organised and well-designed study spaces in the library to suit the variety learning behaviours and activities they engage in. Although users reported that this was one of their most preferred and heavily used facilities within the library setup, only three libraries had such spaces in place.

Zhang (2009) provides what defines and characterises the Information Commons model. Since no library was found to have an Information Commons, this study compared the features which existed in these libraries to what is expected to be an Information Commons model. The following features were found to be present: quiet study areas, chatting space, electronic resources, printing, photocopying and scanning services, ICT support, soft seating areas, PCs with Internet and appropriate software, group study rooms, study carrels (without PCs), reference and research services, space for meetings. However, the following were lacking: video conferencing room, presentation and preparation room, academic writing support, research publishing support, space for seminars and cultural events.

A library space framework developed by Choy and Goh (2016) recommend that in providing for collaborative spaces, libraries should provide spaces for large and small groups. The seating configuration should cater for different group activities such as brainstorming, project work, presentation practice among others, and the spaces should be technologically enabled with the provision of large computer monitors, smart-boards, projection screens and recorders. Such facilities were lacking in the libraries studied.

The changes witnessed in libraries are part of a paradigm shift in libraries where the focus is on the user (user-centred paradigm) (Lippincott, 2012). The Information Commons model expands this paradigm shift to learning-centred paradigm which includes three levels; physical, virtual and cultural commons. The Physical Commons consists of the computer hardware, furnishings, designated discussion and quiet spaces, and traditional collections of the library. The Virtual Commons contains the digital library collections, online service tools, electronic learning tools, and Web presence of the library. The third element, the Cultural Commons, is made up of the workshops, tutoring programs, research collaborations (Heitsch & Holley, 2011). Although university libraries in Kenya have not set up Information Commons *per se*, they have established spaces, services, resources and facilities which can aggregate to key service elements characterising Information Commons. The prevailing service elements fall under physical and virtual commons level. Very little exists in the cultural commons, making the Information Commons model incomplete and hence the reason there was no designated place or space labelled Information Commons, but distinct aspects of the model existed.

The study concludes that university libraries in Kenya have not optimally implemented the Information Commons model in its absolute form despite the existence of drivers and opportunities for this change. The study recommends that:

1. Libraries should benchmark on what constitutes an Information Commons and implement it as it is a need of the hour.
2. Librarians need to get feedback on this model so as to gauge its benefits, better align to users' needs and plan for improvements.
3. The librarians need to congregate or assemble the existing salient features to form an Information Commons and label it accordingly.
4. Establish collaboration between the Information Technology unit and library to set up a technology service within the library to assist in complex technology issues, while the the library offers assistance in information access, all these offered in a central place.
5. To put up an Information Commons in its absolute form requires finances which libraries have been baffling with as a challenge. Libraries should consider implementing this service model in phases.

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