Academic Libraries: Opportunities and Challenges of Resource Sharing within a Merger

Berthilde Uwanwezi
Swedish School of Library and Information Science
University of Borås

Abstract
Much of the research on library resource sharing focused on libraries in developed countries. Additional information is much needed about the challenges and opportunities in developing countries. In 2013 the government of Rwanda decided to merge previously independent universities into one national university where libraries had to function as one unit and share resources. The study presented in this poster explores opportunities and challenges of the practices of resource sharing between libraries of the merged University of Rwanda (UR). Semi-structured interviews and observations were conducted with 25 university personnel selected purposively and policy documents were also collected. The empirical material was analyzed in line with a practice theory framework. Preliminary results presented the opportunities offered by resource sharing but also revealed challenges related to resource sharing and possible solutions. Although the study is based on one Rwandan public university experience, it is useful for other libraries across the world.

Keywords: practices of resource sharing; University of Rwanda; merger; information materials; library personnel competences


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Contact: berthilde.uwanwezi@hh.se

1 Introduction
The resources referred to in this study are meant to be thought in concert. They include human resources, knowledge and skills; digital and printed information materials; buildings infrastructure and equipment such as information and communication technology tools, e.g. computers, library management systems and internet facilities. Research on sharing within Library and Information Science (LIS) have mainly focused on either interlibrary lending, buildings and facilities (Edwards, 1994) or importance and challenges of library resource sharing in general (Jalloh, 1999); on information sharing (Pilerot, 2014) or resource sharing initiatives between libraries (Daly, 2015). Less attention has been paid to library staff, buildings and facilities, competences of libraries and library personnel and information materials in concert. This study contributes by focusing on various resources in the context of academic libraries.

Libraries play a major role in the development of societies. According to Juchnevč (2014), libraries change with society in order to meet the needs of that society. Research has shown that libraries contribute to countries’ economic development in many ways (e.g. Shera, 1976; Juchnevč, 2014; McHombu and Beukes-Amoss, 2015). Academic libraries have been and still are the heart of an institution (Freeman, 2005; Lewis, 2016), they are also central for the teaching, learning and research activities within an institution (Bennett, 2005; 2011).

By helping universities and research institutions to achieve their missions, academic libraries contribute directly and indirectly to economic development of a country. In a changing environment, libraries are expected but also required to contribute to knowledge production and development (Black,
2004), to bridging of knowledge gaps (e.g. Patterson, 2009; Dolan, 2011) and contribute to research performance of individuals and institutions. However this contribution is not recognized by senior managers of these institutions as noted in the report on UK libraries by the Research Information and Research Libraries (2011). Libraries are often allocated insufficient resources given the tasks involved (e.g. Alidousti et al. 2008; Ogba, 2014). While libraries on the one hand are expected to contribute to knowledge production, they are not taken into consideration by institutions and government while preparing their development strategic plans and thus are often given insufficient resources (Lehman, 2014). On the other hand, academic libraries must meet the new needs of users from the changing and evolutionary educational environment (Posner and Simpson, 2011; Bailey-Hainer et al., 2014).

In order to satisfy the needs of their users, libraries opt for or are pushed into processes of resource sharing with sister libraries or institutions, as noted by Breeding (2013). In the process of sharing, libraries have the opportunities to expand and exchange their experiences, their competences and materials of different kinds. Besides opportunities, libraries might encounter challenges that are interconnected and linked to factors such as their historical background, competences of their personnel, availability of resources and the will to share. In this study, opportunities and challenges in relation to practices of resource sharing are explored and related solutions are suggested.

2 Method

25 semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to hear 25 participants talking of opportunities and challenges of resource sharing. Participants include a group of library directors and a group of university senior managers, i.e. deputy vice chancellors, college principals and research directors. The participants were selected from six colleges of the University of Rwanda (UR) spread out in 14 campuses across the country.

The interviews took place in the participants’ workplaces and a voice recorder was used for each interview which lasted for around 45 minutes. In addition to interviews, library directors were observed in their duties in order to apprehend what they do in relation to resource sharing activities. Policy documents, e.g. library policy and/or rules and regulations were collected. Data was analyzed in line with a practice theory approach and according to three elements of practice, e.g. materials, competences and meanings as per Shove et al., (2012). All interviews transcripts, field notes from observations and policy documents were analyzed by comparing the two groups of participants. Thematic analysis was used whereby three themes were generated from data and used to present results.

3 Preliminary Results

Opportunities and challenges of practices of resource sharing are presented with regard to materials and competences. Meanings of resource sharing are seen by participants as opportunities at institutional level, national level and international level. The challenges were expressed in terms of scarcity, connectedness and asymmetry of materials and competences.

Scarcity

At institutional level, participants expressed the scarcity of resources was by comparing available materials to the number of users while at national level the scarcity was justified by comparing available materials to ratios and quality standards recommended by the Government of Rwanda as requirements in higher learning institutions. At an international scale participants referred to international standards applied in libraries and to the experience they have from modern libraries in developed countries. At all these levels, participants judged UR libraries to have fewer materials (i.e. information materials, ICT infrastructure, and facilities such as buildings and space) than the average requirements.
Competences of library staff were judged in relation to ability of decision making. It was revealed by participants that library staff had no power to decide or influence what to be done. Only senior managers were found to hold substantial amount of power in order to decide what to do and how to do it. Policy documents were found to be somewhat weak in supporting resource sharing mainly because there was no harmonized library policy. Competences of library staff in terms of qualification were also seen as inferior to the international required standards. As an illustration, the following excerpt presents a participant discussing scarcity of resources:

You can’t think about the ideal library and resource sharing if you have the... like for us [...] campus which is not connected to the internet network; it is not possible while the basic is not available.

This account, besides emphasizing the scarcity of resources, it does also indicate its impact on future planning of libraries.

**Connectedness**

Participants highlighted at different instances the connectedness or interdependency of resources. They noted how internet connection impacts the activities of sharing of electronic resources and how the lack of a common policy affects activities of interlibrary loan. They also thought it was convenient to have a managerial conducive environment instead of boss - subordinate power relations.

*Even if we can have our catalog online, our colleagues in remote areas will not access, [...] also if users from another library need a copy of a book from my library, in most of the cases I cannot give it to them because I do not have enough copies, so it is always a problem to share what is not there...!*

From this account, it is not only one resource that is lacking rather a mixture of different types of resources that affect most of libraries.

**Asymmetry**

Participants noted asymmetry of resources in libraries. This asymmetry was judged by participants to hamper the practice of resource sharing in the sense that practices would be in one way rather than reciprocal access. For instance difference in library management systems was seen as a major challenge to resource sharing:

* [...] our libraries need to be at the same level which is still a challenge: some libraries are computerized others not, among those computerized some use open sources others pay for annual subscription; we are working at different standards. So we need to harmonize and have one common catalogue showing different locations of resources (P9L).*

In connection with this excerpt, the following figure (figure1) illustrates the disparity in library systems as one of resources.

![Figure1](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure1**: Illustration of different library systems at UR libraries (by the researcher)
From this figure and according to the participants, the diversity of library systems is a challenge for resource sharing especially since in most of the cases it is not possible for libraries to share what they have, for example their catalogues. It is somewhat cumbersome to share electronic resources in a context where some libraries are managing their resources electronically while others are still managing theirs manually.

Regarding the meanings of resource sharing or what participants mean by it, they emphasize to seize the advantages offered by technology to share whatever resources and competences available. At UR level, participants consider resource sharing as a tool for growth, a way of exchange of expertise within the university. It also strengthens the networking and collaboration between libraries and allows unlimited access to resources by all UR users. It is then seen as a way of bridging the gaps and at the same time be a solution to resistance and thus nurturing belongingness to UR. At national level, participants consider resource sharing within UR libraries as a good example for other libraries across the country. On top of that, resource sharing is seen to be a way for internationalization especially through partnership brought by each and every single library or institutions that have merged. In summary, resource sharing presents opportunities for internal and international growth and networking despite the challenges faced.

4 Possible Solutions
Participants regarded the challenges faced to be emanating from the merger process which seemingly was not well prepared for. Hence, from this study, the suggested solutions to challenges and prerequisites for a successful merger and resource sharing initiative include:

- A thoughtful and well planned merger process following step-by-step;
- Prior needs assessment and feasibility study to balance the pros and cons;
- A well-planned preparation period before any resource sharing initiative;
- Establishment of framework for resource sharing;
- Power decentralization and effective communication between different involved actors;
- Change of mind set towards libraries in order to invest in them.

5 Conclusion
This study reports opportunities offered by resource sharing between university of Rwanda libraries and the challenges faced along the course of implementation. Findings show key factors like scarcity, asymmetry of materials and competences that are hampering the practice of resource sharing and additional potential barriers like mind set toward libraries, lack of framework and lack of belongingness to the university. Resource sharing being of paramount importance in helping the universities to achieve their missions, a lot has to be done in order to make it happen successfully. Libraries that intend to share or set up networks for sharing resources are advised to plan in advance, measure the pros and cons in order to enable and succeed resource sharing initiatives. This research though based on Rwandan experiences, it is useful for other university libraries engaged in similar mergers since it provides examples of opportunities and challenges to resource sharing initiatives. It also raises awareness of actions needed to successfully share resources.

6 References


