



# **Analysis of the repositioning of libraries in the University of Sierra Leone in support of eLearning**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

As educational institutions increasingly implement various forms of e-learning to enhance classroom teaching and improve the quality of research, “libraries are expected to transform, in order to cater for this emerging learning dispensation” (Mutula, 2008, 94). The University of Sierra Leone (USL) has repositioned itself as a world-class and Higher Education Institution since the demand for tertiary education continues to take an astronomical rise. Different teaching and learning modes must be considered “if the USL should meet the expectations of its students and clients and remain competitive in the delivery of its programmes while assuring the quality of its graduates” (Redwood-Sawyerr). Elearning is a relevant response which is being religiously pursued in the institution. There is an evident water and pipe relationship between elearning and the library. Library services in the University of Sierra Leone are being aligned to ensure that the institution fulfills its mission and vision. An eLearning application clearly entails software which offers access to an organized digital library.

The mission of the library will remain unchanged though the ways in which librarians fulfill it may change. A useful balance must be sought between conventional methods and those technological offers. There are several possibilities for libraries in the University of Sierra Leone to apply e-Learning. Indeed, university libraries are increasingly becoming more committed to supporting a digitally enhanced environment by providing innovative solutions to integrate library content and services into existing and future course environment (Nazim and Mukherjee, 2016).

If librarians are to maintain their leadership role in this (new) information age, the twenty first century university librarian “should consider operating an automated system that will be accessible to students, lecturer and the general public in order to support teaching, learning, research and extension activities of the university. The system can be worked through collaborative efforts of all concerned” (Harding 2002, 10).

## Elearning

ELearning could be defined as any form of learning wherein the instructor and the learner are separated by space or time where the gap between the two is bridged using online technologies (Patnaik 2021). It is any learning delivered in a virtual environment or a modern form of distance education wherein the training and/or material is delivered via the Internet or an intranet to remote learners (Nazim and Mukherjee, 2016).

This is a gift provided by the new information age. The researcher completed a module from the Portland Bible College in the United States of America while residing in his native land, Sierra Leone. Early in this century, he had to relocate with his family (wife and two children) when he won a work scholarship to discharge services at the West Africa Theological Seminary, Lagos, Nigeria and study for the M.A. in Biblical Studies. The inconveniences of this trip could not be narrated here and the unpleasant experiences are not worth repeating. E-learning, which is the convergence of learning and the Internet, has brought about profound changes world over in the way people learn and train, allowing them to do it anywhere, anytime (Jayadprasad and Venkatramana 2006).

Basically, there are two e-learning platforms:

- i. Scheduled delivery platform
- ii. On demand delivery platform

**Scheduled delivery platform** describes the scenario in which learning takes place in *real time* with participants actively communicating one with the other. This could delivered through a webinar, chat, live web based classes etc. Jayadprasad and Venkatramana (2006) argue that though there is an interaction between the presenter

and learner and suggested time and place requirements as significant drawbacks which could restrict it.

**On demand delivery platform** means asynchronous learning, that is, one that occurs at any time or does not occur in real time. In this mode, information is provided round the clock from any location. Participants are afforded much greater control over the learning process as information is available on demand. This could include, though not limited to, web-based training classes, online resources and interactive CD-ROM/DVD-ROM which are accessed *at the user's convenience*.

### **Role of the library in research**

It is incontrovertible that the library plays a central role in research. Some of these roles include the following:

- Procures research material (journals, books etc) and facilitates easy access and discovery of research material.
- Provides and promotes access to external research material
- Offers a physical space - to work in, to access research material.
- Assists with research tasks (particularly in finding hard to get resources and information gathering).
- Provides information and advice on topics such as publishing your work, copyright, open access, citations.
- Trainings and supports researchers
- Runs the institutional repository (Wurie-Kamara, 2019).

### **Digital or Elibrary**

A digital or elibrary is an information gateway that links researchers to library catalogues, online resources, e-resources, digital resources and discussion forums (Patnaik 2021). Information technology has underscored the concept of a library from the repository of printed materials to a novel environment daubed 'Digital Library.' The emphasis is now on 'connection; rather than 'collection'. Internet connectivity could now give greater access to reading materials than merely developing a print collection. A significant proportion of contemporary researchers and information professionals stress

the need to directly access information on a web device from any location at any time. The Open Access movement for instance “promotes free access to information electronically at one’s access point on the internet. The articles or papers are usually deposited in an open access repository, which through special software, makes them available through search engines in the internet and surfers” (Redwood-Sawyer, 2015, 8).

To maintain their relevance, libraries are responding by meaningfully, though with challenges, incorporating a large number of digital resources and actively seen to be supporting elearning thus eliminating barriers of distance and time. Researchers could not access information processed, stored and accessed in digital formats from their electronic devices. Digital libraries have brought profound changes all over the world in delivering the right content to the right person at the right time (Jayaprasad and Venkatramana, 2006).

One must hasten to note that because and inspite of the tremendous growth in digital resources, users are experiencing difficulties to locate the most appropriate resource relevant to their needs, signaling the ‘eternal’ relevance of the Librarian.

Libraries are now creating platforms as they organize resources and develop novel services to enable learners to access from remote locations. The digital library is indubitably a core component of e-learning as it provides learning outside physical walls. The contemporary shift in collection management is from ownership to access. It is therefore not farfetched to state that the hottest trend in library management is digitization (Panda, 2020).

### **Advantages of E-library**

The digital revolution has changed the relationship between researchers and libraries (Wurie-Kamara, 2019).

Indeed, “the libraries’ role is also changing, they are expected to serve as information literacy trainers, experts in organizing and providing access to online resources, content providers through digitization projects and providers of print resources for learners” (Dhiman 2010). Wurie-Kamara was realistic of her assessment that the digital revolution has changed the relationship between researchers and libraries (2019).

The digital library has countless advantages:

- 1. No physical boundary: users could access information irrespective of geographical boundaries provided there is internet connectivity.** Learners could use materials from anywhere, irrespective of geographical location

2. **Round the clock availability:** Access is unrestricted throughout the twenty four hours in each day. There are no closing hours.
3. **Multiple accesses:** The same resource could be simultaneously used by several users. The challenge of multiple copies in the traditional library does not arise as documents could be viewed by an unlimited number of users simultaneously. There is a publication in the Sierra Leone Collection of Fourah Bay College Library, University of Sierra Leone titled 'The Chiefdoms of Sierra Leone' by Reed and James (2012) which is used extensively by researchers. The challenge with the printed version is accessibility as several researchers would request to use and optimum availability is provided by granting two hours of access to users. The online version of the aforementioned document, however, gives unrestricted access to an unlimited number of researchers.
4. **Structured approach:** Access is provided to much richer content in a more structured manner.
5. **Information retrieval:** The user friendly interfaces accelerates the retrieval of information.
6. **Preservation and conservation:** Multiple copies of the original could be produced without degrading the quality. Rare books that are rapidly deteriorating as a result of age, overuse, poor storage conditions etc. could easily be protected.
7. **Space:** Digital information requires very little space to contain them thereby ameliorating the very serious challenge of available space in the traditional library.
8. **Networking:** Seamless integrated resource sharing could be achieved as there is an opportunity for a digital library to provide the link to other resources of another digital library.
9. **Cost:** Though debatable, the cost of maintaining a digital library after the initial set up is lower than a traditional library. Paying a large number of staff, purchasing additional copies of essential texts, to mention a few challenges of the traditional library, are not among ideal problems faced by a digital library.
10. **Acquisition of latest and updated materials:** the digital materials could be regularly updated and many publishers allow digital libraries to make latest editions accessible.
11. **Library Management Automation:** Librarians are being converted to 'cybrarians' as a result of automation of routine library services – indexing, issuing, tracking and preservations. The modern Library management software comes with built-in features to automate library management.

**12. Real-Time Interactions:** Library management software is packaged with features to facilitate interaction between readers and administrators in addition to setting up online communities for real-time interaction.

**13. Storage of information:** It could not only store but also manage large amounts of digital content, for example, library catalogues, bibliographic databases, course materials, full texts, image and audio clips etc.

**14. Development of one's personal library:** One could easily accumulate publications on a portable reader, hereby developing a unique personal library for further research. It is a truism that "the primary function of an eLearning software is therefore to provide the user with a large content library for self-guided learning or integration with an LMS platform (<https://www.trustradius.com/learning-management-lms>).

**14. Access to text materials:** Learners could easily and quickly search text materials and images

**15. Links to other site:** one could easily have access or links to publishers' sites for full text journals.

**16. Novel means of dissemination of information:** The Library could easily communicate results of searches to a learner's email.

Patnaik, R. (2021, 56), in other words, summarised them into six main areas:

- Digital libraries are accessed through the web from anywhere at any time.
- Availability of full-text documents enables digital libraries to support advanced search, better display features, and relevance ranking.
- Provides simultaneous access requests for the same electronic document.
- Provides access to content in different formats including animation, graphics, audio and video.
- Through appropriate metadata and information exchange protocols, digital libraries can easily share information with similar digital libraries and provide enhanced access to users.
- Digital libraries facilitate preservation of documents.

## Challenges of e-library

Inspite of the above advantages, the digital library could also be fraught with several challenges. Generally issues bordering around computer viruses, seeming lack of standardization for digitised information, health hazards caused by radiation from monitors, to mention a few, are thought-provoking causes for concern,

Specifically, some of these challenges include, though not limited to, the undermentioned:

## 1. Copyright

Copyright is a type of intellectual property that protects **original works of authorship** as soon as an author **fixes** the work in a **tangible form of expression** (<https://www.copyright.gov/what-is-copyright>). Generally, the thought content of an author should not be transferred by another without attribution, a violation of copyright law. A thought-provoking question therefore would be: how does a digital library distribute information while protecting the copyright of an author? Although Merrill and Raduchel (2013) argue that copyright issues could be ambiguous, patchy, and in some respects contradictory; they also assert that meaningful research could also determine best arrangements for correcting deficiencies in enforcement mechanisms.

A pertinent question that must be asked and answered borders around what researchers must know about copyright compliance and academic integrity. Since copyright and other information laws do intersect with library services, Frederikseen, Rodriguez, Greer and Shipman (2016) argue that Librarians must be actively involved in providing relevant information on copyright-related instruction to ensure that researchers are adequately informed about the related issues (2014).

2. **Speed of access:** The speed of access is normally compromised or decreased as more computers are connected to the internet. A realistic prediction in the foreseeable future is that error messages may inundate the Internet if new technology could not tackle this problem.
3. **High initial cost:** The preliminary cost of hardware, software, communication circuit and other related gadgets is generally very high.
4. **Relatively low bandwidth in developing regions:** The digital library would normally require a high band to transfer multimedia resources in an age when band width tend to decrease daily due to its over utilization. A challenge is that “the cost of using ICT/M and accessing the internet is much higher in Africa than in North America or Europe” (2008, Economic Commission for Africa, 67).
5. **Reluctance to change:** There are traditionalists who are of the opinion that the digital library cannot replace or reproduce the environment of a traditional library as the printed world appears to be easier to read than directly reading from the screen.
6. **Preservation:** Due to technological developments, a digital library can rapidly become out-of-date and its data may become inaccessible. Until standards are in place, the use of digitizing for preservation will remain questionable. (Adcock and Kremp, 2021).

## **Myths of e-learning**

ELearning has been met with some resistance ultimately giving rise to several misconceptions. It is neither killing the classroom nor is it antisocial or antipersonal. The use of technology in eLearning does not mean one has to be a technical genius to use it. A car consists of complicated parts but no one needs to be an automobile engineer to know how to drive. On the contrary, every new generation of a car is specifically designed to be easier to use. It is the same with eLearning.

Morrison (2019) identified and debunked common myths about eLearning which include, though not limited to, the following:

1. It doesn't work for all learner types
2. There's no interaction with fellow students
3. There's no interaction with teaching staff
4. it's hard to measure student interaction
5. ELearning is expensive
6. ELearning is complicated
7. Creating eLearning content is complex
8. ELearning moves too quickly
9. ELearning has to be done in the employee's own time
10. ELearning will replace instructors
11. It's easier to cheat
12. eLearning is boring
13. You can't mix in other learning types
14. Everything has to be interactive
15. eLearning courses are difficult to manage

## **The University of Sierra Leone**

The University of Sierra Leone was established by the 2005 Universities Act. It comprises Fourah Bay College (FBC), Institute of Public Administration & Management (IPAM) and the College of Medicine & Allied Health Sciences (COMAHS) respectively opened in 1827, 1980 and 1988.

Fourah Bay College was the first college to be established in Africa South of the Sahara and it became a degree-granting institution in 1876 when it was affiliated with Durham



University in England. It was accorded a university status by Royal Charter in 1960 when it became Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone.

Fourah Bay College and Njala University College, NUC (an agricultural institution founded in 1964) were merged by the 1967 University Act to form the University of Sierra Leone with a federal structure. Parliament transformed the University of Sierra Leone into a unitary structure in 1972 until 2005 when two universities were created: Njala University (comprising Njala University College and other higher educational institutions in Bo and Bonthe, and the reconstituted University of Sierra Leone comprising FBC, IPAM and COMAHS.

Formerly, the President of Sierra Leone was the Chancellor of the above universities. There have been several discussions over the decades assessing political interference in the affairs of students. A committee worth mentioning is the 'Students' Election Investigative Committee' set up in 2013 with very specific terms of reference to investigate riotous behavior of students and recommend transformational and corrective mechanisms. The afore mentioned committee recommended, among other things, that the Chancellor should use his good offices to advocate and encourage government and party officials to desist from active or 'behind the scene' involvement in student politics and governance. It was believed that the return to civility and matured academic levels of political tolerance could be achieved when party politics is left out of students' politics. In light of the above, it opined that "the Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone should not be the head of state" (SEIC, 2013, 10). One of the promises made to the people of Sierra Leone by the current President of the Republic of Sierra Leone when he took over the reins of government four years ago was that the position of Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone would no longer be occupied by the president of Sierra Leone, a promise that has been fulfilled by the appointment of different individuals to that position in the different state-owned universities.

Below are the mission and vision statements of the University of Sierra Leone:

**Mission:** A university that demonstrates its commitment to generating and transmitting knowledge through quality teaching and research for sustained development and whose products are national competitive.

**Vision:** A friendly world-class centre of excellence responsive to needs of society.

The constituent institutions in the University of Sierra Leone (FBC, IPAM and COMAHS) have functional libraries. The University Librarian is Prof. Miriam Conteh-Morgan who is also the head of the library at IPAM. Rev. Oliver Theo Harding and Mr. Saidu Sesay are the respective heads of the libraries at FBC and COMAHS.

In addition to other electronic resources, libraries in the University of Sierra Leone have access to Research4Life which provides institutions in lower income countries like Sierra Leone with online access to academic and professional peer-reviewed content.

The underlisted are the collections and specification under Research4Life:

- i. Hinari (biomedical and health literature)
- ii. AGORA (food and agriculture)
- iii. ARDI (scientific and technical information)
- iv. GOALI (law and social sciences)
- v. OARE (environment)

Currently, the University of Sierra Leone has access to over 154,000 (one hundred and fifty four thousand) resources through Research4Life.

Although Kolhe (2018) correctly identified several challenges in implementing e-learning at academic libraries, his analysis that “lack of technical support, lack of training and support as well as lack of motivation and negligence by institutional management” (58) are among such may not be applicable to the University of Sierra Leone.

### **Objectives of the eLearning initiative in the University of Sierra Leone (USL)**

The University of Sierra Leone has already set a dynamic eLearning centre headed by a former Vice Chancellor of the Institution with specific or precise actions to achieve its goal in eLearning. These have specific timelines for completion. Its specific objectives in the eLearning drive include the following:

1. To provide an alternative learning experience for students and clients (NGOs, sister institutions, business houses and other employing authorities) who may need such services for training, onboarding, and continuing professional development of their employees.
2. To extend the programmes offered by USL to a wider national and international clientele
3. To provide opportunities to unserved potential students who may have not been admitted because their programmes of choice were oversubscribed.
4. To draw from the expertise of the diaspora and other international experts that have expressed interest in online teaching from their country of residence or who can be contracted to participate through online lecturing.
5. To offer greater flexibility to students in achieving their dreams in acquiring higher qualification from the USL without the constraints of the traditional means of education.
6. To capacitate academics in online pedagogical approaches thereby extending their international reach and influence, noting that the successful roll-out of an innovative process needs the buy-in of the least capacitated members of staff who would be required to use it (Redwood-Sawyerr, 2021).

## Digital migration in the University of Sierra Leone

Since no organization can remain relevant in a knowledge economy without facilitating digital library access (Panda, 2020), the University of Sierra Leone has taken very visible steps to invest in a learning management system to leverage the digital advantages.

Sierra Leone's higher education system has been deleteriously affected by several factors including, but not limited to insufficient funding, relatively poor faculty oversight, inadequate staff training opportunities and infrastructure, lack of effective quality management system etc. The University of Sierra Leone administration held a Retreat in Bo from 28<sup>th</sup> April to 1<sup>st</sup> May 2021 with the aforementioned challenges in mind to take necessary strategic actions (in addition to the positive strides already made by the administration) to raise and maintain standards in performance (both academic and administrative). It could not have chosen a better theme – 'Re-engineering of the University of Sierra Leone.'

Initiatives identified towards ensuring quality included the following:

1. Quality Management Training in partnership with UNIDO
2. Consolidation of staff database
3. Mandatory Pedagogy Training of all staff of the University
4. Review of Curricula for all programmes.
5. Harmonization of assessment and examination procedures
6. Academic staff workload audit

Several key recommendations made in the Retreat have been carefully considered, adequately scrutinized and approved by the University Senate. Several project groups were set up to implement the underlisted themes/objectives:

Theme 1: Harmonisation of admissions and assessment processes including exit verification and promotion criteria

Theme 2: Centralised Cordination of Extramural Courses with the setting up of an Institute of Extramural Studies (Community College)

Theme 3: Splitting, merging and creation of new faculties/departments

*Theme 4: Building an eLearning infrastructure, developing eLearning resources and training of lecturers aimed at launching online Masters Courses and expanding USL's distance learning offers*

Theme 5: Review of Administrative Functions (Sahr, 2021).

Another retreat to measure the University of Sierra Leone's readiness to embrace eLearning was organized at the Dohas Hotel, Torwama Street in Bo from Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> October 2021 to Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2021. The Minister of Higher and Technical Education and his team actively participated in this meaningful retreat (during which sixty projectors and other electronic gadgets) were presented to the University of Sierra Leone (for its constituent arms) on behalf of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Retired Brigadier Julius Maada Bio.

The goal of the retreat was to assess the readiness of potential online learning masters courses to be piloted for 2021/22 academic year.

The threefold objectives of this retreat were to:

1. Develop a shared vision of USL's eLearning initiative as an integral part for the University's vehicle for providing access to higher education.
2. Train lecturers and to build their capacity/ability to:
  - (a) provide distance education with the aid of the LMS and a selection of virtual learning tools,
  - (b) prepare high quality and effective lesson plans, coursework, notes and presentations specifically adapted to distance learning,
3. Provide a means of assessing departmental readiness and support requirements to mount online courses.

The University of Sierra Leone recently effected a Learning Management System (LMS) on a platform which had been developed by the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education in Sierra Leone. This LMS is now being used for the current admission process in all three campuses in the University of Sierra Leone (Fourah Bay College, College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences and the Institute of Public Administration and Management).

There are several realistic challenges in this eLearning drive in the University of Sierra Leone which include, but not limited to, inadequate resources and staff. Consequently, selected Masters programmes would be pilot tested in 2022. The intention is to learn lessons that would be cascaded to other similar programmes with time" (Redwood-Sawyerr, 2021).

Below is a list of proposed pilot online Masters programmes:

1. MA in Gender Studies

2. MPhil in Gender Studies
3. Masters in Adult Education
4. Masters in education (Med)
5. MSc in Educational Leadership and Management
6. MPhil in Education
7. Postgraduate Diploma in Education
8. MPhil in Energy Studies
9. MA in Linguistics
10. MBA
11. MSc in Entrepreneurship and Innovation
12. PG Diploma in Procurement and Supply
13. MSc in Procurement and Supply Chain
14. Masters in Development Management
15. MPhil in Public Administration
16. MPhil in Pharmaceutical Sciences
17. MSc in Paediatrics and Neonanotechnology
18. MSc in Pharmaceutical Methodology
19. MSc Social Work

### **Repositioning academic librarianship in Sierra Leone**

A workshop for University of Sierra Leone Librarians titled 'Repositioning academic librarianship in Sierra Leone' was held at the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM) Campus from 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> May 2019. Librarians from the three campus libraries (Fourah Bay College, College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences and the Institute of Public Administration and Management) participated in this three-day workshop which was facilitated by the University Librarian, Prof. Miriam Conteh-Morgan

The justification or rationale for the workshop was, among other things, to address capacity building and magnify services that would lead to more judicious use of resources. Indeed libraries promote and exploit new technologies and new models of scholarly communications (Wurie-Kamara, 2019).

At the end of the workshop, librarians had a better understanding of contemporary trends in academic librarianship and were better positioned to guide researchers in the research process. John Kargbo (2019) identified twelve traits of the librarian as a research as listed below:

1. Knowledgeable
2. Voracious Reader
3. Search Strategist
4. Versatile in information handling

5. Analytic mind
6. Versed with research methodology and citations
7. Good Planner and Manager
8. Good Communicator
9. Good disseminator
10. Good Teacher
11. ICT Proficient
12. A mixer (works in a team)

Five major roles were identified which academic libraries should be playing in the digital age. These, in the estimation of Conteh-Morgan (2019) included, though not limited to the creation of new teaching, learning and knowledge products (e.g. subject portals, web guides); embedding the library in digital learning environments; supporting e-research (e.g. RDM); digital archiving and E-tools and services (for instance, cataloging).

The above notwithstanding, academic libraries could maintain their relevance by displaying skills not limited general computer skills, digitization skills, web authoring, curation of digital content, e-resource collection development, teaching, writing and editing.

## Conclusion

The University libraries in the University of Sierra Leone (Fourah Bay College, College of Medicine & Allied Health Sciences and Institute of Public Administration and Management) must be visibly seen to be share the vision and mission of the institution. As academic members of staff, librarians assume leadership roles. There is an increasing demand on libraries “to put mechanisms in place to harness e-information to effectively partake in the networked world) (Mutula 2008, 99). Among other things, they should strategically position themselves all the research cycle by assuming several roles as journal or repository publisher, author or co-author etc. (Conteh-Morgan, 2019). Traditional library skills should be brought to the new research environments (data curation and management, project management etc).

Libraries are now indeed undergoing transformation and are a fusion or crossbreed of traditional and an ever increasing number of electronic materials. (cite Oliver Harding SCAULWA). Knop (1984) had realistically predicted that African University librarian will eventually pay a very high price in preserving traditional services and embracing the new technological advances. However, he opined that “it must be paid if the African librarian wants to interpose or remain the mediator between the user and information” (p.58).

There is a synergy between eLearning and the library. The eLearning content software for instance offers access to an organized digital library that could include ebooks, videos, online courses etc.

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