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Balancing Tertiary Institutions' Expansion Drive with Conservation Needs of their Libraries: The Case of the Book Binding Unit in the Library of the Midlands State University in Zimbabwe



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Abstract

The Book Binding Unit at the Midlands State University's library has an uphill task of conserving books in the midst of the university's expansion drive. The university is one of the biggest in Zimbabwe with an approximate enrolment of 23 000 students up to date. It has adopted a multi campus system in different cities across Zimbabwe. The unit repairs all the books from all of the university's campuses. Due to limited staff, it is overwhelmed with huge volumes of books in need of repair. Without a purpose built conservation laboratory and adequate storage facilities, the university is overwhelmed with the ever increasing number of books in need of repair. Students doing courses in Conservation of Archives and Records and Archives Management are engaged to equip them with practical conservation skills. This noble idea has helped in ensuring efficiency in work operations in the unit, however it is still struggling to cope with the demands of the conservation work for books due to lack of resources. There is need for the university to prioritise resourcing of this vital conservation unit in its expansion drive so that it matches its multi-campus status.

Key Words: Book repair; Conservation; Tertiary Institutions

Introduction

Colleges and universities across the globe have huge collections of books in their libraries. Due to access and use, these books deteriorate with time. With a particular focus on expanding their services, in some cases universities' budgets are constrained by other priorities which mean that it may take longer to replace such books. To ensure continued access and use of these books in libraries there is need to conserve them. Libraries are central to the core functioning of universities and colleges and any expansion initiatives in these tertiary institutions should also capacitate the functioning of these libraries, which include the conservation of books.

The Expansion of the Midlands State University into a Multi Campus System

The Midlands State University is one of the biggest institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe with an approximate enrolment of 23 000 students up to date. The university has adopted a multi campus system, with campuses located in different cities and towns across Zimbabwe, namely Gweru, Harare, Mutare and Zvishavane. Each campus has its own library. The Book Binding Unit which is based at the main campus in the City of Gweru, is responsible for conserving all the books from all of the university's libraries across the country. See figure 1 for some books that have been repaired. Huge volumes of books that are in need of repair are deposited at this unit.



Figure 1. Repaired books at the Book Binding Unit

Shortage of Conservation Staff in the Book Binding Unit

The conservation unit is under resourced such that it is failing to cope with the ever increasing number of books that need to be repaired. With only one qualified paper conservator and two members of staff, the Unit is overwhelmed with a difficult task of working with huge volumes of books that need to be conserved. There is a backlog of books that are awaiting repair. This negatively impacts access and use of the books in the university's library. Books that are awaiting repair cannot be utilised by students and this affects the delivery of quality education by the university. This challenge is also experienced in other tertiary institutions, for instance in Karnataka (Ambika and Begum 2017).



Figure 2. Books awaiting repair at the Book Binding Unit

Recruitment of Students for Practical Conservation Work: Remediating the Situation?

An arrangement has been made with the library to offer practical conservation work to students doing courses in Conservation of Archives and Records and Archives Management from the department of Archaeology, Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies. This initiative is meant to equip the students with conservation skills through hands on activities. Although this noble idea has helped in ensuring efficiency in work operations in the Unit, it is still failing to cope with the demands of the conservation work for books due to lack of resources and time. The students cannot be recruited on a full time basis as they have other academic commitments they should attend to. Shortage of conservation staff at the Book Binding Unit is an issue that needs to be addressed.

The Need for a Purpose Built Conservation Laboratory and Adequate Storage Facilities

The above challenge is further compounded by lack of a purpose built conservation laboratory and adequate storage facilities to service such a big institution. The university currently uses storage facilities at its Hellenics library in Gweru to house the Book Binding Unit. The storage facilities at Hellenics are failing to cope with the ever increasing number of books in need of repair (See figures 2 & 3). This has led to the piling of books thereby exposing them to further deterioration. Lack of appropriate storage facilities has also been observed at the University of Botswana library (Segaetho and Mnjama 2012).

Balancing Priorities: The University's Expansion and The Conservation Needs of the Library

There has been a phenomenal growth at the Midlands State University with an increase in the number of faculties, campuses and student enrolment. This growth has led to investments in the building of infrastructure at various campuses of the university. Although the library has been resourced in terms of acquisition of books, there is a funding gap on the conservation of books that have deteriorated. This gap is evidenced by understaffing of conservation personnel in the Book Binding Unit of the university's library. This situation has been compounded by lack of purpose built infrastructure for the conservation of books at the university. There is clearly a lack of balance on funding priorities at the university with conservation work being underfunded compared to other infrastructural work that has been funded. Lack of prioritisation in funding has affected many libraries and information centres in Africa (Ogunmodele and Ebijuwu 2013). The university should prioritise resourcing of this vital conservation unit in its expansion drive so that it matches the multi-campus status that it has attained. This unit is key in supporting scholarship at the university through the conservation of books.



Figure 3. Shortage of space for book conservation

Conclusion

As universities embark on expanding their services, it is vital that they consider to fully capacitate their libraries as they are a key component in their functioning. The capacitation of the libraries should include the conservation of books to support learning. This should cover recruitment of conservators, purchasing of conservation equipment and the building of conservation infrastructure such as laboratories and storage facilities for books.

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