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Library Support Services at the University of Zambia amid the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Swot Matrix

By

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Abstract

When the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) forced learning institutions in Zambia to abruptly transition to virtual instruction, library services adapted quickly to provide research services, instruction, and access to collections. This paper details how the University of Zambia Library used a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) Analysis framework to evaluate

academic support services of the Library in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Key variables included the library collections, staffing, services and technology. The analysis revealed that strengths comprised qualified staff, technology support and a rich collection of information resources. Weaknesses are in the areas of poor funding and low staffing at paraprofessional and non-professional levels. Opportunities comprised emerging technology and consortia opportunities. Poor funding, competition from other providers and Covid-19 restrictions are threats. It is hoped that this analysis will help define strategic directions important to the library in an emergency or disaster. The study recommends that the library should leverage digital platforms to enhance service delivery.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, SWOT analysis, Libraries, University of Zambia Library

1. Introduction

The mandate of university libraries is to support the mission of their parent institutions. They accomplish this by providing collections, services, information literacy training, etc. Thus, academic libraries play a crucial role in providing information support to academic activities that universities undertake. In order to succeed, libraries need to identify their internal strengths in order to take advantage of opportunities, whilst avoiding threats and addressing weaknesses. Gurel and Tat (2017) posit that strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) is a strategic planning tool, which helps an organization to be more productive by helping to guide the allocation of resources in order to achieve goals.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a substantial influence on academic library services globally. The compelled closure of library buildings and the introduction of public safety procedures to avert the spread of the Covid-19 during much of 2020 and 2021 brought about a new normal. Academic libraries pivoted to providing services virtually (Begum and Elahi, 2022; Connell, Wallis, & Comeaux, 2021; Martzoukou, 2020; Mehta, and Wang, 2020).

In order to appreciate the academic support rendered by the University of Zambia (UNZA) Library during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, a team of researchers examined via a SWOT analysis framework the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the library. The analysis was

premised on the assumption that Covid-19 has considerably transformed the modus operandi of the library service provision.

1.1 The University of Zambia Library

The Library strengthens and enhances the teaching, research and public service of UNZA. The Library promotes intellectual growth and creativity by developing collections, facilitating access to information resources, teaching how to access information resources and how to use information effectively. Further, the library teaches critical information retrieval and evaluation skills and offers research support assistance. UNZA Library develops, organizes, provides access to and preserves materials to meet the needs of present and future generations of students and scholars. The Library explores and implements innovative technologies and services to deliver information and scholarly resources in a manner that is convenient to the users. Additionally, the library strives to remain relevant and responsive to the needs of all library users.

Hence, the Library is a strategic asset to the University, contributing to the exploration and sharing of knowledge and the development of lifelong critical thinking skills for the betterment of the Zambian society. There are currently six (6) operational departments in the Main Library namely; Cataloguing and Classification, Collection Development, Public Services, Serials, Special Collections and Technical services and the Bindery. In addition, the library operates faculty (school) libraries such as School of Medicine, School of Veterinary Medicine and Graduate School of Business Library. Further, the library maintains its presence in two provinces; namely, Kitwe and Livingstone Provincial Libraries.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Although there is a heightened interest by researchers on SWOT analysis of academic libraries in the era of Covid-19 globally, there is a dearth of research on this subject in Zambia. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed a gap in the literature on SWOT analysis of academic libraries as it relates to the pandemic itself. Accordingly, this study seeks to fill this gap by documenting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of UNZA Library in the current pandemic era.

1.3 Objectives

The principle objective was to carry out a SWOT analysis of the entire library system amidst COVID-19 pandemic. Specific objectives were to:

- Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of UNZA Library
- Analyse the opportunities and threats of UNZA Library

2. Literature review

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2008), SWOT analysis is an overall evaluation of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that the company has. The purpose of this analysis was to combine the four elements of SWOT by putting together the strength of the organisation with the opportunities that exist, so that from these strengths and opportunities one can reduce on weaknesses and overcome the upcoming threats. Helms and Nixon (2010), posits that SWOT analysis is now being used in virtually every sphere of human activity. As a preliminary decision-making tool, the SWOT quadrants organize and puts in order the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016) to 'assess alternatives and complex decision situations. The primary objective of a SWOT analysis is thus as claimed by Schooley (2019), is to help organizations develop a full awareness of all the factors involved in making a business decision.

SWOT analysis of academic libraries, the American Library Association (ALA) currently lists and promotes the SWOT template on its website as an important advocacy strategic tool in libraries (American Library Association, 2008). Despite the limitations of SWOT, "analysts most often resort to SWOT analysis as the preferred tool" to start the strategy planning process (Helms and Nixon, 2010). A SWOT analysis allows a library to think about its strengths, maximise its opportunities whilst keeping an eye on its weaknesses and threats (Shameenda & Kanyengo, 2019).

In the context of academic libraries, SWOT analysis is now being used to examine a number variables such as staff, collections and services of these institutions (Al-Hijji, 2012). Another study in Zambia focused on collection, people, systems, space and partnerships. This study allowed

the library to think about its strengths, maximise its opportunities whilst keeping an eye on its weaknesses and threats and therefore providing “libraries with knowledge on how to respond to them by taking full advantage of the existing strengths and opportunities (Shameenda & Kanyengo, 2019). To this end, using SWOT analysis would help the library understand its strengths, that would be helpful in the new venture, its weaknesses that need to be overcome to be useful in future operations, the opportunities that it has at hand to succeed in the near future and the threats that it perceives in the success of the library operations.

Regarding the response of academic libraries to the Covid-19 pandemic, research shows that Covid-19 has presented unique challenges to all the stakeholders of the education system including libraries. According to Dadhe (2020), the sudden and unexpected outbreak of the virus has forced library professionals to ascertain ways of working in an emergency rapid period such as shifting to a digital platform wherever possible and to provide adequate remote services to the users. This is essentially an emergency that forces a library to abruptly switch its services from mainly face-to-face to digital library services.

Martzoukou (2020) believes that for most universities and their academic libraries, especially those with a less strong online presence, the pandemic has caused numerous challenges as well as presented a catalyst for change and resifting of priorities. Mehta and Wang (2020) has pointed out that libraries had been developing digital services to meet the needs of patrons from different backgrounds, and there is no need for patrons to physically visit the library to use the services. A study done by Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020) showed that libraries were putting in place preventive measures of cancelling public events, providing hand sanitizers for patrons and thorough cleaning of libraries to deal with the effects of Covid-19 pandemic.

The literature on SWOT analysis of libraries reviewed above comprises extracts from the general SWOT analysis of academic libraries. However, there seems to be a dearth of detailed studies applying SWOT analyses to libraries in the era of Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Methodology

SWOT analysis can be facilitated through methods like surveys, questionnaires, observation, focus groups discussions (GGDs) and interviews with library stakeholders. This study followed a case study approach, as it required an in-depth study of the University Library's internal and external environment. The study population was all (N = 12) academic librarians. The choice of this sample was premised on the assumption that respondents with a master's degree and above were deemed to have a deeper theoretical grounding and therefore a better understanding of the SWOT analysis framework. Data collection for the study was facilitated through the University Library SWOT Analysis Questionnaire, document analysis and observation. These gave the researcher the opportunity to obtain firsthand information about the library operations as well as having physical assessment of both materials and human resources of the library. Respondents were asked to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that they associated with their work places. The data collected was organised, coded and analysed using descriptive statistics, which in the words of Agu (2014) refers to the statistical procedures that are used to describe and summarize data for easy comprehension.

4. Results

4.1 Profile of respondents

Of the 12 participants, five (41.6%) were male while seven (58.4%) were female, 11 were holders of a master's degree in Library and information Science while one had a PhD. With regard to length of service, one (8.4%) had been working in the library close to 10 years and below while 11 (91.6%) have been working in the library for over 21 years (refer to Table 1 below).

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	5	45
	Female	6	55
	Total	11	100.0
Qualification	Masters	10	90.9
	PhD	1	9.0
	Total	11	100.0
Length of service	Below 10 yrs	1	9.0
	Above 21 yrs	10	90.9
	Total	11	100

While this list is not exhaustive, it does provide a useful context for the development of the planning framework. Table 2 shows the internal environment of strengths and weaknesses while Table 3 shows the external environment of opportunities and threats.

Table 2: Internal Environment Analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
➤ Diversely talented, efficient & dedicated staff that is always learning and flexible	➤ Staffing inadequacies at professional level	➤ Digital technologies	➤ Funding shortfalls and budget cuts
➤ Library Collections	➤ Funding shortfalls and budget cuts	➤ Upskilling in ICTs	➤ Diminished interaction due to Covid-19 restrictions
➤ ICT support	➤ Lack of interaction with the users	➤ Open access content	➤ Rising demand for online services
	➤ COVID-19 limitations are a temporary weakness		

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Strengths

Thus, assessing a library's strengths includes looking at staff skills and competencies, programming, budget maintenance and community relations.

5.1.1 Diversely talented, efficient & dedicated staff that is always learning and flexible

The human resource is primarily responsible for transforming all other resources into valuable products and services. It is, therefore, necessary to harness this resource with great care and attention. The importance of qualified staff cannot be underplayed owing to the fact that they are the ones to drive an organisation forward and will afford sustainability and growth even when faced by threat of a pandemic like Covid-19 by bringing essential insight into tasks, problem solving, and critical thinking. Trained and technically capable staff members must not only be able to carry out a given task, but also be curious and thought-driven to find alternative ways of providing a service in innovative ways.

5.1.2 Library Collections in all formats

The library boasts of vast and rich collection of both print and electronic resources. For instance, in its effort to continue innovating and making the best learning tools and methodologies available to students during the pandemic, the University of Zambia has procured a digital library, which brings together more than 5,900 global market leaders in the publishing industry. The digital library is a multidisciplinary electronic resource platform with the largest offer of content in all formats including eBooks, audiobooks, videos, etc.

5.1.3 Technology support

The formation of the Technical Services Department (TSD) and the adoption of library based information communication technologies (ICTs) is another milestone in the library's quest to be relevant in this dispensation. The TSD was formed to cope with the extensive computing systems and ICT infrastructure that the library utilises in its day-to-day operations compelled by the need to provide digital services. The department maintains and supports ICT hardware and software used for library services. The department is responsible for coordinating, development, implementation, and management of automated information systems in the library. The department is currently managing various library systems (Koha Integrated Library System (ILS), Institutional repository (Dspace), Moodle e-learning system, e-resources platform and the ID system). Based on the above, the library is now better placed to provide virtual services to support academic activities of the University in the new normal.

5.2 Weaknesses

Analyzing a library's weaknesses means evaluating internal operations. Weaknesses may lie in the same areas as strengths. Weaknesses also identify areas that need attention to reduce the negative impact of their weaknesses. Covid-19 has presented various weaknesses to UNZA Library, making provision of physical services almost impossible.

5.2.1 Inadequate funding

A major weakness of the library according to the participants was poor funding. For instance, funding reductions have led to the library failing to subscribe to a number of databases. With

accelerated trends in library investments toward digital resources and services reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic, increased funding is necessary.

5.2.2 Low staffing at professional level

Although the library boasts of a qualified cadre of professional librarians, there is however a problem of understaffing at this level. This situation is militating against the library's capacity to expand virtual services. The involuntary shift to online learning due to Covid-19 restrictions has brought in the need to have more qualified academic librarians, to help learners in the online space. There was need to intensify online engagement with both faculty and students through WhatsApp, Zoom, Google meet and other virtual platforms (Lumpa, 2022), which needed more qualified academic librarians.

5.2.3 Inadequate Covid-19 protective equipment

Similarly, poor funding to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the failure by the Library to buy Covid-19 protective equipment. A study by Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020) showed that libraries were putting in place preventive measures of cancelling public events, providing hand sanitizers for patrons and thorough cleaning of libraries to deal with the effects of Covid-19.

5.2.4 Lack of interaction with the users

Another problem, which Covid-19 has brought, is the lack of interaction with the users. The pandemic imposed a lack of physical contact with the users, who might be misinformed about the virus and its treatment from various random sources. Librarians feel it is their responsibility to combat misinformation and in this situation, it is hard to follow up with the patrons who are working remotely.

5.3 Opportunities

According to Evans and Ward (2007), not capitalizing on opportunities may hinder the library's realization of plans and goals. Despite chronic disruption to service delivery, the Covid-19

pandemic has presented many opportunities to UNZA Library. The pandemic has accelerated trends that were already happening, that is providing services in the digital formats.

5.3.1 Digital technologies

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an inevitable surge in the use of digital technologies due to the social distancing norms and lock downs. Digital technologies that are being adopted to enhance remote working and interaction with library users include social media tools such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Thus, the pandemic period has seen the library investing in further digital services to expand its digital offerings, from electronic databases to e-books to better support patron information needs. The implication for this window is that librarians should harness this momentum in order to provide additional technology training and identify essential technology skills for employees. This finding agrees with Mehta and Wang (2020) who opined that libraries had been developing digital services to meet the needs of patrons from different backgrounds, and there is no need for patrons to physically visit the library to use the services.

5.3.2 Open access resources

Covid-19 outbreak has accelerated the rise in adoption of Open Access (OA) content by both faculty and students. The Library is now seeing more interest in OA content during the Covid-19 pandemic, due in part to a lack of access to physical materials. For instance, seven participants (N=7, 63.6%) indicated an increased demand for online resources. OA to scientific information and open data facilitate better and faster research towards knowledge creation.

5.3.3 Upskilling in new technologies and resources

Ten participants (N=9, 81.8%) noted that this is an opportunity to develop technological skills. The participants further observed that this was a rare window in which to upskill and incorporate alternative software and new resources into our service delivery. Furthermore, it has triggered the development of new digital skills in information management and delivery.

5.4 Threats

Analyzing library threats means evaluating factors outside the library that hinder its success. Maintaining current awareness of threats allows the library administration to plan and act.

5.4.1 Inadequate funding

Covid-19 had seen significant reductions in several principal revenue categories such as bindery services, printing and photocopying services. This problem threatens the library's ability to sustain let alone build the collections. There is need for creativity and innovativeness with regard to resource mobilisation on the part of librarians if the library is to survive in the current harsh environment.

5.4.2 Rising demand for online services and products

The rising demand for online services and products to meet user's information needs is a risk to the library's existence. Virtual services were being galvanized to satisfy user's informational needs and if the dependences on these virtual services and digital collections continues, there are chances this paradigm shift may replace the library as a physical place.

5.4.3 Diminished interaction between librarians and users

Covid-19 pandemic has brought about a diminished user-librarian relationship. Owing to the current pandemic, the library experienced disruptions to its service delivery. Covid-19 has also affected both staff and students physically and mentally. A study conducted in Germany by Munk et al., (2020) found that Covid-19 proved to have not only an acute physical impact but also a psychological burden on humans. Consequently, the library ought to be ready for such calamities by implementing strategies to mitigate similar future occurrences.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Following the SWOT analysis during the Covid-19 era it can be seen how the strengths, which are beneficial to the achievement of the objectives and come from the internal source, together with the opportunities emanating from the external source, overcome the weak points that endanger the achievement of the objectives, along with the threats from the external source. Based on these results, library managers can develop a new strategic plan for success of the library in the new normal. This study recommends that the UNZA Library should leverage digital platforms to enhance delivery of virtual services in the new normal. Equally, the library should devise novel ways of financial resource mobilisation for library operations.

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