

Transcending the ivory tower : academic libraries' engagement with society in africa

This study performs a critical investigation of academic libraries, focussing on their engagement with and responsibilities to the wider society. It examines the roles and contributions which academic libraries make to society beyond their host higher educational institutions, which are often referred to as ivory towers that distance themselves from societal realities. This study is done in response to growing interest expressed in the literature for greater evaluation of the impact of academic libraries and increasing calls for academic libraries to contribute more to societal development and progress, especially by promoting civic participation and democracy. The study further exposes the principles underpinning the practices and operations of academic libraries in a bid to interrogate their underlying ideologies and hegemonies.

The approach used to achieve the study's objectives involves a literature review which explores the relationship between academic libraries, higher educational institutions and society. The review also examines debates and opinions about the purpose, stakeholders, principles and services of academic libraries and their role in providing information solutions to the dynamic and evolving needs of society particularly in Africa. Furthermore, the study employs an in-depth qualitative content analysis methodology to examine the mission statements of several academic libraries based on a theoretical framework of critical theory. This analysis provides evidence and generates insights about the extent to which academic libraries regard commitment to societal development as part of their responsibilities.

The key findings of the study show lack of consensus among academic libraries with respect to their stakeholders, roles, principles, motives and beneficiaries as well as the extent to which they engage with society. A practical implication of this study is a clarion call for transformation of academic libraries to become more involved in the life of society. Thus, the study offers suggestions on how academic libraries can better contribute to societal development.

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