



Barriers to Compliance with Library Standards in Ugandan Universities

Patrick Odong¹, Elisam Magara² & Clement Lutaaya Nabutto³

¹Kabale University, Uganda; ²Makerere University, Uganda, ³Makerere University, Uganda

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Abstract

University libraries are essential in supporting teaching, learning, and research; however, several universities failed to achieve the minimum requirements as envisaged by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) and international bodies like IFLA because they face many systemic and institutional problems. Therefore, the study investigated the barriers affecting compliance with library standards by Ugandan universities, as discussed in this study, with a view to enlightenment on institutional, technological, and regulatory hindrances to effective library service delivery. Data collection was carried out through a mixed-methods research design under a pragmatic paradigm in 12 universities through questionnaires (n = 433), interviews, participant observations, and document reviews. Findings revealed that limited funding, outdated and inadequate information resources, poor ICT infrastructure, unstable power supply, inadequate reading space, understaffing, and low staff capacity greatly impacted the compliance levels. High enrolment of students vis-a-vis the gradual expansion of library services, poor enforcement of policy, and negative attitudes towards the library from stakeholders further aggravate the non-compliance issue. The study, therefore, concludes that most of the universities did not attain the minimum levels of NCHE standards owing to systemic and operational problems. Hence, it is recommended that regulatory oversight be strengthened, institutional investment increased, staff trained continuously, content developed within the country, and engagement of users promoted toward filling in these gaps. These findings therefore provide a basis for further advocacy on policy formulation and institutional reforms toward improving library services in Uganda's higher education institutions.

Introduction

Compliance with library standards by universities is essential to ensure equity in access to quality information resources and to foster the academic excellence of each institution. At the global level, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) offers global standards in the promotion of inclusive, sustainable, and ICT-oriented library services (Devi, S., Gupta, 2024). Regionally, many African university libraries continue to confront systemic barriers, including inadequate funding, outdated infrastructure, and limited digital capacity, which hinder adherence to global standards (Jain & Akakandelwa, 2016). The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) of Uganda has set minimum standards for library space, staffing, and the



provision of resources; nevertheless, most universities continue to function below these set thresholds, this is because they cannot raise sufficient funds for improvements, due to weak enforcement, and institutional neglect (NCHE, 2017–2018). Although these studies highlight the importance of library standards globally, there is a notable lack of research examining how underlying factors hinder Ugandan universities' full compliance with these standards, particularly from a multilevel perspective that includes infrastructure, staffing, ICT, funding, and policy enforcement. This study aims to fill that gap by providing empirical insight into the challenges impeding standard compliance across the country in university libraries.

Literature review

This section discusses literature related to barriers to compliance with library Standards in Ugandan Universities, as shown below:

Financial constraint and inadequate Infrastructure

Finance is a structural issue in adherence to library standards within the university system, especially in the Global South. Heavy workloads, low budgets, and insufficient resources to invest in infrastructure or procure digital materials and funds for staff development are common in universities in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia (Moahi, 2019; Kumar, 2019). As an example, the University of Delhi was critically underfunded with poor digital library activities, so it had to resort to the use of the public-private partnership to mitigate such shortcomings (Kumar, 2022).

Equally, the situation is no different in Ugandan universities. Infrastructural requirements are among those where universities did not perform to the NCHE standard (NCHE, 2017/2018). According to NCHE (2005), universities are required to provide each student with a minimum of 2.5 square meters of space; however, they have been unable to do so due to a lack of resources. Such infrastructural deficits are indicators of institutional financial apathy that demand the need to increase sustainable funding systems. Organisations which support the gaps in the form of standards compliance are organisations such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and regional organisations such as the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in East Africa (CARLEA).

Human Resource Limitation

The aspects of staffing problems, such as a lack of trained staff and inappropriate staff development approaches, significantly impact the performance of directing standard-compliant library services. According to Ocholla (2021), poorly trained librarians are a significant problem in East African universities like Makerere, which makes the services inefficient. The functions of the library were also undermined by the issues of human capital and acquisition of technology at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria (Adeleke, 2016). Logistical and institutional constraints, too, including poor budget prioritisation, inability to host the creation of a library, and the overall lack of leadership support, contribute to the situation in Uganda (Nyakweba et al., 2021). Although the NCHE suggests the budget amount devoted to libraries should be more than 10%, the majority of universities spend much less (Kasozi, 2017; NCHE, 2018/2019). Such restrictions permeate into unmodernized and understaffed libraries. It is high time that the supporting commitment of the institutions was provided to capacity-building projects and to staff training partnerships at the regional level.

Technological factors

The issue of technological adequacy is of prime importance to help the university libraries meet the requirements of the standards of both countries and the globe. Nevertheless, the acquisition of e-resources and new library systems is hindered by ongoing challenges in ICT infrastructure. Low internet connectivity, inadequate and obsolete hardware, and the lack of digital skills in personnel



are still a bane of the university libraries in Africa (Adekoya, 2023). Financial limitations and weak institutional desire make universities in Uganda unable to use digital systems (Oguntuase, et al., 2025). The regulatory demands of NCHE regarding digital integration are weakly enforced, hence the digital divide is even worse due to the non-existence of strong regional networks regarding knowledge sharing (Nyakweba et al., 2021; Emezie & Igwe, 2017). Conversely, some institutions, such as Moi University in Kenya, have been able to incorporate the national accreditation standards into the library policies, which can be adopted by other institutions in Kenya (Wamukoya & Mutula, 2019).

Limited Regulatory Enforcement

Non-uniformity in the application of national standards is another factor that significantly contributes to non-compliance. Although NCHE provides regulatory guidelines for Ugandan universities, several institutions continue to fall short of NCHE standards due to accountability and inspection issues. To illustrate, the poor supervision has seen universities circumvent specifications concerning infrastructural setting, ICT adoption, and experience level (Nyakweba et al., 2021).

On the regional level, an unbalanced administrative and policy-related coordination has resulted in different applications of the library standards. Compared to Uganda, Kenya has stricter enforcement of standards, as evidenced by the alignment of institutional policies (Moi University), which highlights the role of governance in supporting compliance (Wamukoya, 2016). To better Uganda, it is necessary to enhance provincial leadership, monitoring, and regional policy convergence.

Methodology

The research study was a mixed-methods study that used questionnaires, interviews, observations and reviews of documents undertaken on a purposive sampling of 12 preselected universities in Uganda to check how libraries are meeting the mandate for library standards.

Study Design

The study was descriptive and survey-oriented within a mixed methodology, integrating the two methods (qualitative and quantitative methods) to assess the compliance of Ugandan university libraries with government standards comprehensively. This design allowed the researcher to collect numerical data to measure, statistically, various levels of compliance while at the same time capturing context-based information through interviews and observations. The study was guided by the pragmatic paradigm, which allowed for flexibility in selecting different providers or sources of data to address the research questions or test hypotheses related to more measurable issues (e.g., the level of compliance by the libraries). At the same time, the other challenges confronted were more abstract (e.g., shortage of resources and gaps in policy) (Mertens, 2009). Triangulation of data collection methods and sources-bestowing questionnaires, interviews, observations, and document reviews, was employed to increase the validity and reliability of findings; hence ensuring sustained analysis of systemic barriers to compliance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

Study Area

The study was conducted across 12 universities in Uganda, systematically selected to represent different regions, although there was some geographical bias toward western Uganda. The selection considered diversity in institution types, including public and private universities, to capture variation in compliance levels. The rationale for directing attention toward university libraries was that these are at the centre of academic quality and at the higher order of national regulatory standards. The study area gave a contextual understanding of infrastructural conditions, policy implementation, and resource allocation-all of which are key factors in measuring compliance (Kothari, 2016).



Study population

The research group population consisted of two major bodies: (1) users of the library (students and faculty) and (2) library employees and quality control officers. These groups were selected because their views touch operationally on the realities and difficulties in achieving the library standards. They consulted library users to gather insights into the quality and availability of the services, and also obtained the views of librarians and regulators at the institutional and policy levels. Those invited as quality assurance officers played a vital role in comprehending the monitoring and evaluation tools, providing the whole picture of the compliance situation (Taherdoost, 2016).

Sample Size and Sampling

With the sample consisting of 433 respondents, users of the libraries were randomly sampled to have representativeness; purposive sampling was used for librarians and regulators to get the expert point of view. The sampling was stratified according to differences in institutions among the 12 selected universities. Multi-stage sampling reduced the risk of geographical bias; furthermore, the selection of universities was systematic to get a balanced representation. For qualitative data, key informants were selected purposively (e.g., senior librarians) depending on the considered expertise and role. The size of the sample was therefore deemed sufficient for statistical generalisation (quantitative) and thematic saturation (qualitative) (Creswell, 2018; Taherdoost, 2016).

Data Collection

Four data collection tools were used for data gathering: (1) questionnaires (to acquire quantitative data on compliance levels), (2) interviews (the qualitative kind for librarians and regulators), (3) observation (for seeing whether infrastructural and resource gaps existed), and (4) document review (of policy frameworks and audit reports). These underwent pretesting to ensure instrument validity, and for most constructs, Cronbach's alpha was greater than 0.7, thus confirming reliability.

A questionnaire was used to collect data from library staff, while an interview tool collected data from Head Librarians. The study findings revealed that a combination of institutional capacity, governance, technological integration, alignment with academic programs, regulatory oversight, and cultural factors influenced compliance with NCHE library standards in university libraries in Uganda.



Table 1: Library staff opinion about factor hindering compliancy to library standards

Factors	SD	D	NS	A	SA	Mean
Limited information resources to the academic programs offered	4(4.2%)	11(11.6%)	7(7.4%)	49(51.6%)	24(25.3%)	3.82
Reading space not enough	12(12.6%)	26(27.4%)	3(3.2%)	35(36.8%)	19(20%)	3.24
Some Staff are not up to date with the current library systems	5(5.3%)	22(23.2%)	7(7.4%)	38(40%)	23(24.2%)	3.55
Slow network and internet also hinder access to library services	5(5.3%)	38(40%)		37(38.9%)	15(15.8%)	3.20
Library staff are lack customer care skills when serving their users	18(18.9%)	25(26.3%)	10(10.5%)	22(23.2%)	20(21.1%)	3.01
Limited local content to support teaching in a local setting like Uganda	3(3.2%)	16(16.8%)	9(9.5%)	38(40%)	29(30.5%)	3.78
lack of monitoring from respective authorities and quality assurance officers to ensure quality library service	7(7.4%)	19(20%)	11(11.6%)	38(40%)	20(21.1%)	3.47
The growing number of students also affects library services	5(5.3%)	22(23.2%)	9(9.5%)	37(38.9%)	22(23.2%)	3.52
Average	7.38	22.38	7.00	36.75	21.50	3.45
Lack of policies for the implementation of university library standards	16(16.8%)	28(29.5%)	5(5.3%)	32(33.7%)	14(14.7%)	
Limited budget affects library standards implementation	1(1.1%)	5(5.3%)	1(1.1%)	42(44.2%)	46(48.4%)	

Source field Data 2023

The analysis in table 1 reveals several factors hindering libraries in Uganda according to general staff opinions

Table 2: The interview opinion of key informants (Head Librarian on factors affecting library services)

Key Findings / Responses	Librarian Quotations	Universities
Limited access to local physical and electronic resources. NCHE mandates local content for accreditation.	"We struggle to find relevant Ugandan content for teaching and research."	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L
Inadequate electronic devices and slow internet, limiting research and online access.	"The few computers we have are old, and internet speeds are frustrating."	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L
Limited budgets prevent stocking of relevant academic resources.	"Our shelves are empty of current books. We can't afford to stock properly."	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L
Unstable electricity affects digital services and equipment.	"Power outages damage our systems and interrupt service delivery."	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L
Limited knowledge of library systems (e.g., KOHA, Dspace) hinders efficiency.	"We have KOHA, but few know how to use it well."	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L
Inadequate customer care due to negative attitudes and lack of communication skills.	"Sometimes users feel unwelcome or ignored by staff."	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L
Inadequate reading space, especially during peak hours.	"Students find it hard to get a seat during exams."	B, D, E, F, H, I, J, K, L
Stakeholders' negative attitude leads to inadequate budget and infrastructure support.	"There's a general lack of value placed on library investment."	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L
Student enrolment is rising without a matching increase in library services.	"We're overwhelmed too many students, too few resources."	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L
Understaffing and high workload stress staff after COVID-19 layoffs.	"We're short-staffed and exhausted there's too much to handle."	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L

Field data, 2023

The findings of the study, which were determined by the responses to the questionnaire of the library staff (Table 1) and a set of interviews with the Head Librarians (Table 2), show some convergence of views on the most significant issues that make following the library standards of the university difficult in Uganda. Table 1 quantitative data indicate that these were the significant issues of concern raised by the staff, most notably limited information resources in relation to the academic programs (Mean = 3.82), insufficiency of local content (Mean = 3.78), obsolete staff skills accommodative to the current library systems (Mean = 3.55), and the effect of increasing number of students on service delivery (Mean = 3.52). The others were a lack of monitoring by bodies such as quality assurance departments (Mean = 3.47) and inadequate reading space (Mean = 3.24). In the meantime, customer care (Mean = 3.01) and internet speed (Mean = 3.20) were still ranking sufficiently, but there was less agreement that the library is doing a good job in these areas. The absence of clear policy implementation and protracted underfunding, even though the table is not averaged, has also become a critical constraint, where a considerable percentage of the respondents indicated that they strongly agree on their effect.

To supplement such survey findings, theoretical aspects of the interviews (Table 2) offer a contextual background and a verification of the obstacles that the staff members mentioned. Inadequate budgets, inefficient ICT infrastructures, limited local content, and inadequate training in library systems (e.g., KOHA, DSpace) were invariably raised by Head Librarians as key issues. Furthermore, the problems identified during interviews included a lack of electricity, a heavy workload created by an insufficient workforce, bad customer relationships, and the growing number of students, which supports quantitative findings. The combined methods (questionnaire and interview enabled triangulation of data, in which the macro trends obtained in the surveys were supported by micro-level testimonies of various practitioners in 12 universities. Collectively, the methods give a holistic insight into the fact that adherence to library standards of NCHE is being compromised through systematic financial, infrastructural, human resource and policy-based issues. The illustration below confirms outdated collected observations.

Figure 1: Sample Outdated Collections in libraries



Source field data, 2023

The picture above also revealed that books are of old editions, which is against the NCHE minimum standards. Additionally, interview respondents pointed out that the limited collection of resources not only affects academic programs and course units but also extends to electronic resources. Respondents also revealed that both open-access and subscription databases were found not to have local content, hence limiting access to diverse and current academic information resources.



Discussion

The findings indicate that university libraries in Uganda continue to suffer from systemic challenges that may inhibit them from fully complying with the standards set by the NCHE. One crucial challenge is the insufficiency of appropriate and locally oriented information resources. This shortfall limits libraries' support for curriculum and research, thereby negating the NCHE norm of resource alignment and recency of collection. The problem in acquiring Ugandan materials and the expensive prices of imported books further affect the development of localised collections. This is a challenge noticed by academic libraries in Nigeria and Saudi Arabia (Igbo et al., 2022; Aslam, 2019). East African universities, across the border, are facing similar impediments in the localisation of content for academic use (Kakai, 2021). From within Uganda, the other impediment is that the cost of publishing makes it difficult for potential publishers to publish relevant materials (Bushmana et al., 2021). These problems have, together, negatively affected libraries' regular maintenance of the NCHE ten-year rule on collection currency.

Limitations in the physical servery pose severe concerns for compliance. The libraries fail to provide sufficient reading space, directly contravening the NCHE spatial requirements of 2.5 square meters per user. Emerging from overcrowded study conditions that were once fading were concepts about a disjointed growth of enrolments vis-à-vis the expansion of facilities. Misalignment of this kind compromises the user experience and also impacts academic success, as has been pointed out by similar studies in Ghana and Kenya (Bouaamri et al., 2022; Gikunju et al., 2023). Expanding on the Ugandan setting, Alikoba and Lwanga (2019) referred to instances where rising enrolments have not been accompanied by corresponding infrastructure development, thus continually resulting in non-compliance with spatial and environmental standards.

Another obstacle to compliance is the failure to incorporate ICT fully in the operations of the library. Intermittent internet connectivity, poor state of facilities, and low digital literacy levels among employees are degrading the automation of services and increasing access to e-resources. Such constraints are against what NCHE is expecting in terms of service delivery, which is driven by technology. The lack of proper training defeats the usefulness of systems such as KOHA and Dspace, even after they are installed. Other studies conducted in Uganda have identified similar ICT-related limitations, citing the inadequacy of computers, bandwidth, off-campus access, as well as the training of its users (Odong et al., 2025). More generally, weak ICT infrastructure and low digital literacy have been recurrently highlighted in the literature as some of the issues in developing regions (Moyo, 2015). In contrast, in Central Uganda, the intermittent power supply and the lack of significant funding for ICT stand as constant problems (Acanit, 2016).

Persistent staffing gaps and weak customer service are significant challenges to adhering to NCHE library standards. The quality of the user support aspect and the general work of the library are undermined by the fact that there are unmotivated members of staff, limited numbers and the burdens of post-pandemic workloads. Such human resource gaps diminish the capacity of libraries to provide standard professional services to their users and effectively manage their interactions. The role of expenditure on staff development and the development of a culture of service within the framework of all kinds of libraries is an important issue worldwide (Mugo & Mathu, 2021). Limited supervision and insufficient training have persistently been identified as the contributors to the decline in the quality of library services at the regional level (Kakai, 2021). Another problem with the Ugandan scenario, as noted by several university librarians, is the poor internal systems of accountability, the failure to enforce the same by the NCHE and institutional quality assurance offices, resulting in inconsistent selection of staffing norms as well as standards in customer service. This loose regulation practice results in inconsistent performance, which remains unabated, except that the use of non-compliance has increased.



The consistent underfunding is another significant barrier to NCHE compliance by academic libraries. Without sufficient budgetary allocations, libraries cannot acquire new resources for all programs, modernise their infrastructure, including ICT equipment, recruit and maintain trained staff and so on. Such systemic underinvestment not only impedes modernisation but also limits the capacity of libraries to adjust to the requirements of technology and keep it in line with the needs of users. These issues are compounded by instability in utility services, particularly electricity, which hinders access to e-resources and destroys electronic literature, a phenomenon also observed in other African settings, such as Nigeria (Nnadozie et al., 2017). The economic realities of this country, as depicted by the majority of the institutions in Uganda, show a trend of failure to meet the recommendation of the NCHE to allocate 10% of the budget to library services. What makes this even worse is the fact that there are no institutional-level and clearly outlined library policies, which make the planning process and allocation of resources irregular.

Conclusion

The study analysed service delivery barriers that impede the Ugandan university libraries from meeting the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) standards. Findings revealed that university libraries are significantly constrained by several factors, including inadequate finances, limited ICT infrastructure (slow internet and no computers), minimal local content, erratic power supply, outdated materials, and insufficient physical space. Furthermore, staff shortages, inadequate technical skills in library systems, poor customer care, and rapid student enrollment without corresponding resource growth exacerbate the non-compliance. The study highlighted discrepancies between the NCHE standards and the library situation, whereby many institutions are grappling with ensuring that they comply with the minimum requirements due to systemic and operational constraints. If any, they collectively diminish the standards of library services that impact the outcomes of teaching, learning, and research in Ugandan universities.

University libraries must, therefore, play critical roles in service delivery and innovation. By interacting in academic departments and with publishers, university libraries can improve access to locally relevant content, such as institutional repositories and subject-specific journals. Quality can be maintained by continuously training the librarians on subjects and technologies pertinent to their work, including KOHA, DSpace, Turnitin, and customer service. Libraries should also implement a user-centred approach by applying feedback mechanisms, designing the physical spaces and services that meet the needs of their academic communities, such as group study spaces, and virtual support. Finally, users of the library, including students and academic staff, must also be conscious of being part of the improvement process. Users can contribute by providing feedback through surveys, forums, and committees. They also promote the use of locally developed academic content, seek better services through student guilds and academic associations, and encourage the responsible and innovative use of library services.

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