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Literacy Skills: The Bedrock of Faculty Officer's Performance in Public University Administration

Abstract

The University Faculty Officer is the senior administrator in a faculty and closely works with the Dean of Faculty, other academics, other administrative staff, and the University community. The use of "literacy skills" is key to the optimization of his/her administrative performance. This paper therefore, used the available literature to discuss how "literacy skills" enhance performance and effectiveness of the Faculty Officer (FO) in university administration. The paper argues that Faculty Officers, as university senior administrators (USA), could perform better when they have good foundation in the use of administrative/management, documents /records and information management literacy skills. This paper recommends a university-initiated supportive learning environment in the form of continuing professional development opportunities in order to optimize the performance of the Faculty Officer who is the hub around which faculty administration revolves.

Background to the Study

Literacy is commonly considered as the ability to read and write at a designated level of proficiency and it has also traditionally been contrasted with oral communication. According to Graff (2008), literacy is defined as a technical capability to decode or reproduce written or printed signs, symbols, or letters combined into words. However, it has become increasingly common to refer to different forms of literacy, such as computer, mathematical, or graphic literacy. Graff further indicates that most experts believe that people need a combination of many different forms of literacy to meet the demands of modern life. The concept of literacy skills as fundamental tools for effective performance is analogous to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner (1993) contends that clear standard for performance depends on multiple intelligences. He proposed 8 intellectual faculties some of which are interpersonal intelligence (abilities to understand others), linguistics intelligence (ability with words) mathematical intelligence (ability in mathematics and logical thinking), and musical intelligence (ability to play music). Gardner holds it that appropriate combination of these faculties could yield results. In the same vein, Moll (1994) opines that literacy is not in isolated bits of knowledge but in learners' growing ability to use literacy in more and broader activities. Although both literacy skills and multiple intelligences involve mastery of symbols, the latter is believed to be relatively fixed while literacy skills are developed through education, experience and practice. Some other authorities in literacy, for example, Paris, Lipson and Wixson (1994) think that the definition of literacy is dynamic, evolving, and reflects the continual changes in our society. From the cited literature, it could be argued that, even though the Faculty Officer may have some knowledge in administration, s/he needs to combine certain literacy skills for effective performance.

The University is a complex administrative cum academic organization made up of teaching and non-teaching staff. These two groups work together to achieve the university's binary institutional goals. The University Faculty Officer is one of such non-teaching specialized professionals sometimes referred to as senior administrator in the Faculty or the Head of the Faculty Administrative Section.

In most public university administration, the Registrar is the head of non-teaching staff in administration, and is assisted by Assistant Registrar category (e.g. Junior/Assistant/Senior/Deputy Registrars) among whom the Faculty Officer is appointed and charged with the responsibilities of a Senior Administrator of a faculty. By virtue of this position, the Faculty Officer represents the University Registrar at the faculty level and is empowered to control, direct, coordinate and supervise the work of all non-teaching staff in the faculty.

As a professional administrator s/he is expected to be at par with the required literacy skills to work with and through his/her academic head who is the Dean of the faculty, Heads of department or programme leaders, other teaching staff as well as non-teaching staff to achieve institutional goals. It is, therefore, critical that the FO should be a professional administrator (in this paper, professional administrator is used as a generic term to cover university Senior Administrators in administration-related positions) with sound grounding in administration - related literacy skills such as administrative principles and theories, information management, documents and records management literacy and also the ability to apply and improve on these skills for effective performance. There are no qualms that a Faculty Officer could be faced with some administrative challenges. However, if those challenges are not professionally controlled with the required literacy skills, s/he may disrupt the administrative setting of a faculty.

Universities have policy documents which include missions and visions that guide them to achieve their mandates. Public universities in Ghana derive their mandates from the government of Ghana. Government instruments establish universities after a Presidential assent has been given. For example, the University of Ghana (UG) and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) were established by Government Ordinance, whilst the University of Cape Coast (UCC), the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) and the University of Mines and Technology (UMaT) were established by Acts and Laws. The UEW derived its authority as the only public university in Ghana that is responsible for the training of professional teachers for pre-tertiary institutions from Act 672 of the Parliament of the Republic of Ghana, entitled ‘ ‘ The University of Education, Winneba Act, 2004’’. These documents (Ordinances, Laws and Acts) provide public universities with their power to undertake their functions of teaching, researching, rendering community service, awarding certificates, degrees and diplomas and performing other activities that are ancillary to these functions. In order to run university administration smoothly for it to achieve its mandate, systems and policies are put in place to guide its activities some of which are controlled and coordinated at the faculty level by the FO.

Public universities partly thrive on decisions made by boards and committees of academic faculties. The secretary to these boards and committees is the Faculty Officer and as such s/he is required to be well equipped with literacy skills, to organize meetings and write to aptly reflect the record of proceedings. In addition to this, s/he is expected to interpret and apply university policy documents appropriately. Examples of the policy documents are university statutes, strategic plan, conditions of service and student handbooks.

To Luther Gulick (1937), cited in Mankoe (2002), for effective and efficient operation planning, organization, staffing, directing, controlling/coordinating, reporting and budgeting (POSDCoRB-which are the principles of administration) must be handled with the required literacy skills. In a similar vein, the Classical or Scientific Management School of Thought contends that an administrator can only do a perfect job when s/he first studies the techniques of administration as a profession which may be likened to the study of medicine, law or architecture.

The Faculty Officer, in the discharge of his or her duties, deals with a lot of documents and is therefore expected to manage information, documents and records efficiently. The prime function of the Faculty Officer in records-related matters is to ensure proper documentation, retrieval and dissemination of information. This suggests that information and records management literacy skills, among others, are predictors for the effective performance of the FO. The Faculty Officer who is literate in information and records management applies them to ensure that faculty decisions and activities are reflected accurately in official documents like minutes and reports and also keep them well. The Faculty Officer as a professional administrator is expected to bring his/her expertise to bear to ensure that university and faculty policies are interpreted correctly and precisely for implementation.

Although there could be many other literacy skills that the Faculty Officer may need to acquire for the efficient discharge of his/her duties, this paper will focus on only three of them namely: administrative /

management, document or records management and information literacy skills and the implications to the Faculty Officer.

Objective

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that administrative/management, documents / records and information management literacy skills are essential in efficient performance of the Faculty Officer in faculty administration in particular and university administration in general.

Theoretical Framework of Literacy Skills

Literacy is not an inborn human characteristic. It is rather an ability that is learned most often in schools. Graff (2008) supports this assertion by indicating that no correlation has been found between literacy and intelligence, but literacy and educational level are closely related. The Faculty Officer contributes to the general operation of the Registrar's office as a team member and as such needs to be conversant with the documents s/he works with and even go beyond that for ingenuity.

Literacy empowerment is central to continuous improvement at the personal, professional and organizational levels. At its core, literacy empowerment motivates the Faculty Officer to strive for optimal performance in his/her official functions to enhance faculty administration in specific and university administration in general. According to Gialamas, Cherif and Helentzaris (2003), literacy empowerment is a crucial component in faculty administration. A Faculty Officer who is well versed in faculty or university administration, effectively applies literacy skills in the performance of routine duties and shares performance information as well as a very strong signal of empowerment, transparency and trust to everyone in the faculty. In their book, *Empowerment Takes More Than a Minute*, Blanchard, Carlos and Randolph (1996) contend that empowerment is more of an empty promise in liberating leadership within people. For them, empowerment is not just giving power but then giving people the opportunity in the wealth of knowledge (needed literacy skills) and motivation (enabling environment) to do their work magnificently. In university administration, Faculty Officers are second or terminal degree holders and therefore, are expected to be empowered with the needed literacy skills to function as professional administrators. However, it would not be out of place if an enabling environment is provided to build on these skills to help improve university administration.

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that effective performance of the Faculty Officer does not solely rest on his/her authority as Assistant Registrar but also depends on his/her ability to use the required literacy skills that had already been acquired through training.

Administrative/Management Literacy Skills

Afful-Broni (2004), postulates that administration is an activity that requires getting work of an organization done by utilizing and coordinating the efforts of others. In this context, the efforts of others obviously cannot be utilised if the FO does not have the required literacy skills to do so.

Educational administration deals with the process of getting things done within educational settings like the university. Management of an educational institution ,on the other hand, is a collective effort aimed at providing an environment in which “teaching and learning can flourish, resulting in student satisfaction, high performance, retention and a wide range of career opportunities” (Mayers, Recordati, and Hhmier, 1995). Effective teaching and desirable student performance cannot therefore take place in a poorly managed environment. Based on that understanding, it becomes evidently clear that it is incumbent on the Faculty Officer or the university senior administrator to help the faculty and staff to recognize the best prospects of realizing the faculty mission and vision in line with that of the institution to achieve its primary goals (McGregor 1960). Just like any senior administrator in higher education administration, the Faculty Officer is required to be armed in administrative/management literacy skills to enable him/her to provide administrative support and supervision of daily operations and performance to the faculty and the university. With administrative/management literacy skills, s/he ensures timely processing of documents,

requests, and provides academic support in accordance with university regulations, policies and procedures.

The Faculty Officer who is administrative/management literate could apply, among other organizational functions, the theories and principles of administration to perform creditably. Knowledge gained from these theories and principles equip the Faculty Officer or University Senior Administrator with the needed literacy skills when planning and organizing activities such meetings, fora, seminars, workshops, conferences, official visits, proposal writing, daily routine activities, and the like.

One of such theories was propounded by the Classical or Scientific Management School of Thought led by Woodrow Wilson, Fredrick Taylor and Henri Fayol. They contend that administration must be studied as a profession to learn the needed theories and practice or literacy skills before being practiced. Henri Fayol (the first modern organizational theorist), cited in Mankoe (2002) opines that if senior administrators were trained with administrative/management literacy skills, they would be in a better position to improve the daily operations of an organization. This school equips the administrator with knowledge in scientific management, administrative management and bureaucratic management and their emphasis is on managing staff and institution more efficiently.

Another theory worth mentioning in this paper is the Human Relations or Behavioural School of Thought led by scholars like Douglas McGregor, Elton Mayo and Mary Parker Follet. They postulate that administration is a tool for understanding people within an organization. They hold it that this theory provides the administrator, and for that matter, the FO with literacy skills to handle personality, attitudes, values, motivation, group behaviour, leadership communication and conflict, among other issues professionally. In summary, their emphasis is on understanding human behaviour. Faculty Officers, as senior administrators, work with superiors, colleagues, subordinates and other stakeholders and as such they need to relate to them well to strike a balance in staff attitude and productivity.

Authorities in administration have defined scope of administration in varying terms. Gulick (1937), sums up the scopes as POSDCoRB denoting planning, organization, staffing, directing, co-ordinating, reporting and budgeting. However, Dahl, Waldo and Simon in 1946 and 1947 released articles and books criticizing POSDCoRB. Nevertheless, it has stood the test of time and has been heavily cited and expanded upon by scholars and practitioners in the field of administration and management since 1937.

Faculty administration refers to faculty or institutional objectives, policies, schedules, procedures, tools/equipment and methods for achieving or acquiring them. Thus in planning to introduce a new programme in a faculty will demand that the FO/USA applies literacy skills in POSDCoRB to prompt the faculty, at their planning stage to consider the following: institutional mandate, policies on sources of funding, requirement of the job market, lecture halls/rooms number of qualified staff, admission requirements, course content and descriptions, duration of the programme, mode of examination and certificate to be awarded. The Faculty Officer also through the Registrar (Division of Human Resource) ensures that both human and material resources are set for the programme to take off. However, the FO would find alternative means to re-plan activities if there should be any derailment in his/her administrative operations. This is because as an administrative literate, the FO is expected to appreciate institutional challenges. As per Mankoe (2002), studies in administration equip professional administrators with the professional knowledge in administrative/management theories and practice to perform efficiently and effectively.

Faculty administrative activities are coordinated from the Dean's secretariat by the Faculty Officer who is expected to be adequately appraised with the principles and theories of administration. This will provide enhanced performance opportunities for the faculty and equally enhance learning opportunities for students. The Faculty Officer is said to be skillful at his/her work when he/she is empowered with administrative literacy skills.

Information Literacy Skills

Faculty Officers today are faced with technology driven academic environment, one in which they must have information literacy skills necessary to perform efficiently on their job. It must also be mentioned that quality administrative services recognize the value of information literacy. This is because working output, learner centeredness and research excellence are effective component of information literacy that the Faculty Officer must acquire in other to make him or her ethical. Again it helps the FO to be creative, act with integrity and demonstrate inform decision making skills.

To Blanchard (1999), people without information cannot act responsibly whilst those with information are compelled to act responsibly. The Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) has defined information literacy as knowing when and why one needs information, where to find it and how to evaluate, and communicate it in an ethical manner (CILIP, 2005). Bundy (2004), similarly defines information literacy as an understanding and a set of abilities enabling individuals to “recognize when information is needed and have the capacity to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information”. It is therefore, incumbent on the Faculty Officer to be current with performance information for efficiency. For instance, Academic Board Decisions. With the understanding that the Faculty Officer works hand in hand with the Dean of a faculty and also coordinates the efforts of departments to develop and implement strategic plans and other policies, s/he needs to be conversant with how to source information. When there is an issue concerning a staff or a student, and the decision of a faculty is not favourable to the party (ies) involved, the Faculty Officer has to prudently, cautiously and ethically help the victim(s) to understand the decision taken by the faculty by referring him/her to the section of the appropriate policy document that informed the decision of the faculty.

As indicated by Rader (2002), the majority of studies investigating information literacy have been conducted in the academic environment. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest in information literacy in the workplace. Lloyd (2006) introduces a new dimension to the concept by asserting that in order to become information literate in the workplace, it is necessary to not only access and use information from textual sources but also from physical and social sources. This assertion indicates that the Faculty Officer has a heavy task to deal with when it comes to information literacy skills, since s/he is not expected to tap knowledge from only textual source but also from people with special expertise. For instance, if an issue has to do with student admissions and examination, the Division of Academic Affairs should be contacted for relevant information and assistance.

The acquisition of information literacy skills is being driven forward, through pedagogies such as problem based learning and information evaluation skills to meet the increased pace of technological change. Armed with the required knowledge, the FO is expected to carefully handle information since about 85% of the administrator’s work is communication (Mankoe 2002). Bampoh-Addo (2006) shares the same view by asserting that the administrator’s first and continuous task is communication. The Faculty Officer in the discharge of his/her duties disseminates information through reports, minutes, letters, telephone conversation, memos, fax and e-mails to members of the faculty and the university community.

Eisenberg (2008) claims that the most widely used set of skills that seeks to articulate the entire information-seeking life-cycle is made up of six steps, and he defines them as task definition, information seeking strategies, locations and access, use of information, synthesis and evaluation. Such approaches seek to cover the full range of information problem-solving actions that a person would normally undertake, when faced with an information problem or with making a decision based on available resources. Information literacy skills could therefore, increase confidence in the process of research, abilities to synthesize information and create knowledge that result in higher quality assignment outputs. Faculty Officers who are able to source for information, understand and critically analyze information are empowered with knowledge and skills. Such people have the ability to recognize a need for information,

determine the extent of information needed, access information efficiently and critically evaluate information and its sources and also the skill to redraft information generated. This is evident, for instance, when a Faculty Officer is tasked to write corporate reports to cover activities of the basic units that constitute the faculty. Examples of such reports include the Vice-Chancellor's annual report and student-staff consultative committee report.

It is expected that the Faculty Officer who is information literate can interpret, communicate and implement policies and practices for differing needs of the University at the faculty level by playing advisory and monitoring roles.

Documents/Records Management Literacy Skills

Documents/records management literacy skills simply means the ability to read, understand and to deal appropriately with documents and records. In the past, records management was sometimes used to refer only to the management of records which were no longer in everyday use but still needed to be kept. However, more modern usage tends to refer to the entire 'lifecycle' of records- from the point of creation until their eventual disposal. Hence, Kopper (2002) defines records management as the field of management that is responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition of records. The United States Department of Defence standard also defines records management as the planning, controlling, directing, organizing, training, promoting, and other managerial activities involving the life cycle of information, including creation, maintenance and disposal. A record (evidence of an activity) can be either a tangible (hard) object or digital (soft) information. Office documents, data, e-mail and their management show evidence of an organization's activities and transactions.

The Faculty Officer as a custodian of faculty records is assigned the official responsibility for the creation, retention and disposition of records. The FO therefore needs records management literacy skills to adopt the right approach to filing of documents, creation of new files, proper referencing, easy retrieval of documents, proper storage and their disposal. Records are disposed according to the policy on disposal of records of an institution and this knowledge helps the FO who has document or records management literacy to utilize all available information to determine the retention or disposal requirement of a record and work accordingly.

For some people, records management is often seen as a low priority administrative task that could be performed at the lowest levels within an institution. However, publicized events have demonstrated that records management is, in fact, the responsibility of all individuals within an institution and the corporate entity. This therefore, implies that Faculty Officers and senior administrators should supervise secretarial staff to do proper filing and not to leave documents in the hands of clerks and messengers to manage them all by themselves. Every faculty generates records in the conduct of its activities, depending on their relative importance and the FO applies literacy skills in documents or records management to determine their level of priority for records management. Although some people claim that management of paper documents does not need special training to store and retrieve other than a rudimentary plan for organization, retrieving and filing can infact labour intensive and time consuming.

For efficient performance, the FO uses literacy skills in records management to observe the following:

- Keeping records or documents that are used on regular basis in the most accessible place such as file cabinets and office lockers. (e.g. documents on appointment and promotions, minutes, schedule of allowances). Records that are needed by many people in an office (e.g. circular letters- float file) must be centrally located so that the people concern would have fairly easy access. Those records that are not regularly used (e.g accreditation report) must be kept in a different place to avoid inhibition of ability to locate records needed more regularly.
- Types of records could be grouped together according to their functions (e.g. finance, projects)

- Confidential records like personal files and examiners' reports on promotion require special handling by only the Faculty Officer and the Dean of the faculty.
- In reviewing records, the Faculty Officer who has knowledge and skills in record inventory will know which records should be maintained and which ones to dispose. Examples of documents or records that are usually maintained in faculties are minutes, faculty decisions, proposals, and accreditation reports.

In conclusion, the ability of the F.O to manage documents and records well, rests with his/her ability to readily update the faculty and the university with needed information for action if need be. Example of such information includes extract information from a minute to buttress an issue to save the image of a university.

Implications for the Faculty Officer

The paper arguably revealed the following as implications for the Faculty Officer:

- There are indications from the literature that Faculty Officers who have literacy skills for administrative, information, documents and records management may become better at managing information, communicating and presenting ideas in the discharge of their duties as empowered university senior administrators.
- The Faculty Officer needs to be computer literate to be able to work faster and more efficiently on classified documents such as letters, memos, reports, proposals and so on.
- Literacy skills, in its various forms, offer administrators the needed tools to access, manipulate, transform, evaluate, use and present information like letters, reports, minutes, advice the dean, other teaching staff, colleagues and subordinates.
- The Faculty Officer with the assistance of the clerk of a faculty is in charge of the filing system in the faculty and will therefore, need the required skills and knowledge to manage records appropriately for proper storage, filing, easy retrieval and disposal.
- The Faculty Officer who is information literate can access information efficiently and effectively and can also evaluate information critically and competently before using it. For example, the Faculty Officer scrutinizes application documents for appointments and promotions before processing them for interview or assessment, and this requires the aforementioned skills. Processing of documents for appointments and promotions sometimes demands consultation with senior colleagues in administration or the University Registrar for situational interpretations and crosschecking of policy documents.
- Faculty Officers and other senior university administrators at risk are those who either lack the three literacy skills discussed in this paper, or the enabling environment to help them to practice or develop the skills.
- The skills also put the FO in a position to make suggestions for policy modification when the need arises.

Conclusions

While effective performance of the Faculty Officer in university administration is achievable, it requires the efficient use of literacy skills in administrative/management, documents/records and information management. Furthermore, it requires a change in how the Faculty Officer perceives these skills for professional development. Implications of literacy skills discussed in this paper demonstrate the need for universities to propel the Faculty Officer and other university senior administrators to contribute positively and participate effectively in university administration. Aspects of literacy skills together help the Faculty Officer and other university senior administrators to inquire, to think critically to gain knowledge to draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge. The Faculty Officer applies this knowledge in his/her work and can also share the new knowledge with the faculty, colleagues or the university management. All these qualities would positively impact the work of the Faculty Officer who uses about 85% of his/her working hours to communicate -

either by writing , speaking, holding discussions, supervising work in the faculty, making follow ups for feedbacks and so on. The Faculty Officer with the relevant literacy skills could work with little or no supervision to ensure the growth of the Faculty administration in particular and University in general.

Recommendations

- The University should support literacy needs and interests of Faculty Officers and other senior administrators to promote the profession of university administration.
- The University should create opportunities for professional certification for Faculty Officers and other senior administrators to develop literacy skills that are required of them.
- The University Library in collaboration with the ICT centre should provide a range of activities and services which will facilitate foundations of information literacy.
- Future university workshops should engage Faculty Officers and other senior administrators to realize that information literacy skills have lifelong applications.
- Universities should periodically organize workshops on records management for F.Os. and other senior administrators

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