

**Assessment of Information Delivery Services for Distance Education
Programmes in Taraba State, Nigeria.**

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Abstract

The paper assessed information delivery services for Distance Education Programmes in Taraba State, Nigeria. The study traces briefly, the history of National Open University and National Teachers' Institute. The study adopted the survey design method. Questionnaire was used as instrument for data collection. From the analysis of the data collected, it was found that information services are provided in support of open and distance education programmes; modern technologies are used in delivery of information services for the distance learners. It was recommended that the management and library administrators should enhance planning, orientation programs, renewed focus on developing the flexibility of services offered.

Keywords: Information Delivery, Open and Distance Education, Social Media

Introduction

Libraries are indispensable in every facet of higher education. Library support to distance learners is mandatory for qualitative delivery of knowledge and learning. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has transformed all aspects of society particularly information dissemination. Librarians have obligations to provide information service to support the educational, recreational and economic endeavours of the members of their respective communities. Information services in libraries take variety of forms including direct personal assistance, directories, sign exchange of information called from a reference source, reader's advisory service, dissemination of information in anticipation of their user needs or interest. Open and distance learning (ODL) reflect both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner.

Open and Distance learning refers to education and training in which resources are used rather than attending classroom sessions as the central feature of the learning experiences. It also refers to situations where learners are physically separated from the educational providers, communicating in writing (using letters, mails, e-mail, fax or computer conferencing) verbally (by telephone, audio conference, video conferencing) or in face to face tutorial/ facilitation sessions. According to Jegede (2010), distance learning is the provision of education by a mode other than the conventional face-to-face method whose goals are similar to, and just as noble and practical as those on-campus, fulltime, face-to-face education.

Open and Distance learning is a system characterized by physical separation between the teacher and the learner, in which instruction is delivered through a variety of media including print and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) to learners who may rather have missed the opportunity earlier in life or have hitherto been denied the traditional face-to-face formal education due to socio-economic, career, family and other circumstances.

The philosophy of Open and Distance Learning aims at allowing people/students to study: what they want; when they want; where they want, and how they want. Open distance learning (ODL) is about increasing educational access and choice. The emphasis in this kind of education is on learning rather than teaching. Course materials are designed to facilitate learning. The onus to learn is on the students.

The open and distance learning in Nigeria started with the practice of correspondence education in preparing for the General Certification in Education (GCE) as a prerequisite for the London Matriculation Examination for the admission into the University of London (Olejede<http://www.wkieducator.org>). The early correspondence colleges include Wolsey Hall, Rapid Result, Exam success, etc.

According to Eya, (2011), at the very beginning, handful Nigerians were able to utilize the opportunity. However, with time, few universities commenced academic programmes in the name of distance learning. The University of Lagos commenced a correspondence and open studies unit (COSU) in 1974 which has since metamorphosed into a full-fledged distance learning institute in 2004. Having been named correspondence and open studies institute (COSIT) in 1974 – a gap of 30 years, Ahmadu Bello University provided an in –service Teacher education programme through the distance learning Mode in 1976. The University of Ibadan in 1988 established the External study Programme (ESP). The new nomenclature now is Distance Learning Centre (DLC).

In 1976 and 2003. the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) as single mode institutions with the sole mandate of providing Open distance education was the needed indication of the total commitment and acceptance of Distance Learning by the Federal Government of Nigeria. However, while the NTI's programmes are for teachers only, the NOUN programmes cut across many areas such as Education, Management sciences, Arts and Social sciences, Science and Technology and Law. At the non-degree level, NOUN runs Certificate and Diploma programmes. It is to be noted that NOUN received accreditation in thirty out of thirty one open programmes she presented to the NUC. About five months ago the NUC pronounced that all part-time programmes should be suspended in all the universities. Thousands of Nigerians are studying abroad without going to the institutions because the study is mediated through information technology.

Research questions

To guide this study, the researcher poses the following research questions;

1. What is the state of provision of library resources in support of information needs of distance learners?
2. What are the benefits of user education to the distance learners?
3. What is the extent of provision of reference services for distance learning programme?

4. To what extent do social network (media) support distance learning programme?

Literature Review

The provision of library resources through virtual library is very pertinent to distance learners as it allows for equal opportunity that is open to the usual day to day student otherwise known as regular student. It is important that Distance learning student (DLs) are able to access institution library resources in a timely and convenient way (Heap, 2001). This has been enabled by the existence of seamless and improved functionality of interfaces, such as new resources discovery software (Bower & Mee, 2010). This benefits all users, but in particular DLs who need to access library resources from home or work (Hensley & Miller, 2010). Access to licensed e-journals and e-books has not completely removed the need for physical access via postal loan services, inter-library loans (ILLS), and document delivery services (possibly delivered electronically directed to users) (Bower & Mee, 2010).

Distance or online learners have the same sort of information enquiries as on-campus students, such as ‘known-item’ searching, exploratory searching and narrow or indepth enquiries for research. Their inability to interact directly with librarians must be addressed by the service providers, according to Whitehair (2010). By using technology such as virtual reference tools, libraries have the ability to provide a better service to DLs (Rao, 2007). Virtual reference (VR) enquiry services are “initiated electronically, often in real-time, where patrons employ computer or other information technology to communicate with reference staff, without being physically present” Kern (2009:1). These enable librarians to offer the same level of service as has traditionally been provided to on-campus students in “untraditional ways: Cohen and Burkhardt (2010:267). When serving DLs a flexible approach should be taken to the methods used and the times which they are made available (Whitehair, 2010). It will often be the case that librarians and DLs will need to work co-operatively together over a period of time so that an answer can be

found to a particular question. Therefore, it is important that VR services are used to develop relationships between librarians and DLs (Cohen and Burkhardt, 2010).

Skype based information enquiry services can be used to overcome or compensate for the difficulties academic librarians have with providing a timely and comprehensively service, especially to overseas students both on distance learning courses and exchange programs. By using a technology that students are familiar with, the library can “provide effective, usable and value-driven services” Cohen & Burkhardt (2010:266) which are more personalized. It is important to identify needs first before deciding to use technology, so that it can be used in an intentional and deliberate manner (Cohen and Burkhardt, 2010).

Online community services are sometimes considered as a social network service, though in a broader sense, social network service usually means an individual-centered service whereas online community services are group-centered. Social networking sites allow users to share ideas activities, events and interests within their individual networks (Aina, 2011).

Social networks are already using a wide-range of social networking sites, the use of online social networks by libraries and information organizations is also increasingly prevalent and a growing tool that is being used to communicate with more potential library users as well as extending the service provided to individuals libraries. (Nie, et al, 2011).

The various social networking sites for distance education librarians or world class librarians that can be used to provide services at both international and national level includes Facebook, Myspace, 2go, Saptu Brower, Opera mini, Twitter etc. These websites help people to build up networks and relationships among themselves. In addition to these sites, various web 2.0 techniques may be used to develop better relationships among people.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey approach, as it is only involved in seeking the opinions of the students on information services provided to them by librarians. The study involved two study centres, National Open University, Jalingo study centre and National Teachers' Institute Jalingo study centre. With the use of accidental sampling techniques, the instrument was administered only to the students met at the centre. The research instrument was a 24-item structured questionnaire developed by the researcher titled "Library support for Distance Learners questionnaire" (LSDLQ). It had 4 sections: Section A sought their opinions on library resources to support distance learners; Section B ascertained the user education support to the distance learners, while section C sought their opinions on the reference services support distance programmes; section D sought their opinions on social network (media) support to distance learning.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the data analysis and discussion of the results of the study.

Research question 1

What is the state of provision of library resources in support of information needs of distance learners?

Table 1: Provision of library resources and information needs of distance learners

| | Item description | No. of Students | Percentage % |
|----|--|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. | the information materials in the library are not helpful | 28 | 9 |
| 2. | Information resources available are relevant | 98 | 30 |
| 3. | Alternative information resources are available elsewhere | 73 | 22 |
| 4. | Information resources in the library are not current | 73 | 22 |
| 5. | The resources did not contain information needed | 37 | 11 |
| 6. | The information resources cannot be accessed at convenience time | 55 | 17 |
| 7. | The information resources are hard to retrieved | 118 | 36 |

The results showed that, the information resources are hard to retrieved, 118(36%); however, information resources available are relevant, 98(30%), but are not current, 77(22%); alternative information resources are also available elsewhere, 73(22%)

These findings are in line with Long's (2009) and Hitchen's (2005) discoveries that information support services to distance education learners were not adequate especially in terms of availability of the resources needed.

Research question 2

What are the benefits of user education to the distance learners?

The data answering research question 2 is presented in table 2.

Table 2: the benefits of user education to the distance learners

| | Item description | No. of Students | % |
|----|--|------------------------|----------|
| 1. | The availability of user education has not had any positive impact on library services | 39 | 12 |
| 2. | The user education interactive video has made me to be aware of these resources available | 217 | 66 |
| 3. | The user education through lecture method help me to familiar with library layout | 172 | 52 |
| 4. | User education through online tutorials has led to the exposure of online resources | 138 | 42 |
| 5. | User education through discussion forums has increase my level of confidence on the use of library resources | 152 | 48 |
| 6. | User education facilitate access to information resources at convenient time | 55 | 17 |
| 7. | User education creates awareness on information resources | 118 | 36 |

The findings of this study affirmed that user education has positive impact on library services. There was a significant improvement on the number of students who benefited from it, user education interactive video recorded 217(66%) also user education through lecture 172 and 138 (42%) 152(48%) showing significant improvement. These findings are in line with Heap (2001), Secker, (2008) Virkus (2008) Kramer (2010) maintained that students can meets their

specific needs through well taught user education and overcome complexities rather than having them removed from them.

Research question 3

What is the extent of provision of reference services for distance learning programme?

The data answering research question 3 is presented in table 3.

Table 3: Provision of reference services and distance learning programme

| | Item description | No. of Students | Percentage % |
|----|---|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. | The process of providing reference service is smooth and without hurdles | 50 | 15 |
| 2. | Receiving digital resources by e-mail is helpful | 132 | 40 |
| 3. | Librarians are very skilled in the art of returning books by post | 131 | 40 |
| 4. | It is a fact that librarians are trained how to per use and surf the internet to assist students. | 79 | 24 |
| 5. | Books are not given the correct call numbers which makes it difficult to access resources | 120 | 37 |
| 6. | Library doors are opened to users even on weekends and public holidays | 123 | 38 |
| 7. | Receiving photocopied articles by post is helpful because the library staff is always assisting | 115 | 35 |

Table 3 shows the responses of the students on provision of reference services how it helped them. According to them, Receiving digital resources by e-mail is helpful; Library doors are opened to users even on weekends and public holidays; Books not given the correct call numbers which makes it difficult to access resources which recorded 120(37%) respondents.

These findings are in consonance with the view of Whitehair (2010), Rao, (2007) that by using technology such as virtual reference tools, libraries can provide a better references services to distance learners, just as the on campus students.

Research question 4

To what extent do social network (media) support distance learning programme?

The data answering research question 4 is presented in table 4.

Table 4: Social network and distance learning programme

| | Item description | No. of Students | Percentage % |
|----|---|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. | I prefer receiving library information through telephone | 67 | 20 |
| 2. | Access to the use of e-mail is restricted to some categories of students | 89 | 27 |
| 3. | Librarians are always willing to assist students through instant messenger | 116 | 35 |
| 4. | I collect library resources for use at home through post | 107 | 33 |
| 5. | Online information instruction services encourage me to utilize the library regularly | 88 | 27 |

Table 4 presents the responses of the students which indicate that Librarians are always willing to assist students which recorded highest number of respondents; the collection of library material for use at home through post 107(33%); librarians' willingness to assist students through instant messenger 16(35%), online information instruction service encourage students to utilize the library regularly, 88(27%).

The findings are consistent with what Nie, M., et al (2011) which states that the use of online social networks by libraries and information organization is increasingly prevalent and a growing tool that is being used to communicate with more potential library users as well as extending the service provided to individuals libraries. The findings buttressed the move of Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria Calling for "Mandatory National Workshop on e-library services in an Era of Change" to sensitize and equip librarians with basic skills for the deployment of e-library.

Conclusion

The essence of library services is to empower patron to acquire knowledge. On the basis of these findings, it was concluded that students in academic libraries on/off campus have positive perception of library resources. The user education is significantly high, that is the students of National Open University and National Teachers' Institute Jalingo study centres make adequate use of user education to increase their level of confidence on the use of resources. The reference service and the social network (media) support for distance learning programme in the library indicated that the services are fair.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Institutions' management and library administrators should make conscious effort towards planning, equipping and up-dating resources in libraries. This will contribute to the growing literature in libraries aimed at promoting and improving perceptions and use of resources in academic libraries.
- ii. Orientation programs on the use of computer for information retrieval should be conducted and made compulsory for new entrants into the profession so as to cope with the current trends or the new technological revolution.

- iii. There should be a renewed focus on developing the flexibility of services offered, as well as investigating ways of personalizing them on a mass scale, such as the use of web 2.0 tools and recommendations within the library catalogue.
- iv. The library management should ensure that strategies are put in place to support distance learners balance studying with other commitment by:
 - Increasing the number of e-books that can be downloaded on to personal e-readers
 - Enabling postal loan requests to be made directly from library catalogue.
- v. Academic library management should constantly provide current high quality collection to meet student learning and research need.
- vi. Libraries should use the opportunities of social media facilities to provide information service to students especially the distance learners.

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