EQUITY-BASED LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICE IN DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: MYTH OR REALITY?

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ABSTRACT:

The desirability and usefulness of library and its services in any academic programmes is never a contentious issue as they promote quality in education. Success stories of programming and implementation of open and distance education programmes have been told in several parts of the world. Among other things, students in this system sit in their homes and work places to receive their teaching either through the web or hard copies of modules. Library and information services including the teaching of lifelong information literacy skills (ILS) to distance learners are as well supposed to be within their easy reach to meet their information needs. Yet for reasons of distance and dispersal, library and information services to the ubiquitous students may be fraught with lots of difficulties. But are these irredeemable? Lest distance learners continue to suffer the disadvantage of increasingly getting marginalized, a sizeable number of professional library associations in various parts of the world enacted some regulations that guarantee a need to pay attention to their information needs. A lot of efforts, including building the capacity of students on knowledge economy in the use and application of e-resources, are now being exploited. This paper aims at, among others, discussing how technology comes to the rescue in service delivery even in some African institutions. Painfully however, even the 'pedestrian' attempt to adequately cater for them in some places is not without its drawback. Is equitable library and information service to open and distance learners possible, particularly in Africa? Is it a myth or reality?

KEYWORDS: Library, distance education, Technology, information skill, lifelong learning.

Introduction

Either operating as a single, dual, mixed or consortia mode, distance education is possibly the most significant phenomenon occurring in higher education worldwide today. The universal explosion of interest in distance education seems to have prompted Daniel (2000), a former Vice Chancellor of British Open University to observe that …whereas in 1990, only a small proportion of traditional universities offered any distance learning courses, by the year 2000 very few did not have such offerings. He notes that today, no self respecting university president can

admit to not offering courses online. Similarly, after observing the attraction generated by distance education and warm reception given to it Gibson and Herrera (1999) predict that "Universities won't survive. The future is outside the traditional campus, outside the traditional classroom. Distance learning is coming on fast".

From Europe to North America to Australasia, Asia and Africa, distance education has taken firm roots. Indeed, in several other parts of the world success stories of programming and implementation of open and distance education have been told. In the United Kingdom for example, the establishment of the Open University (UKOU) in 1969 was particularly regarded as a significant milestone. Reflecting on the exploits made by the Open University (OU) in distance teaching, Daniel (2000) notes that when the UKOU achieved higher ratings for its teaching of Engineering than Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College, London it was a sign that what had begun 30 years earlier as a radical and suspect initiative for second-chance students had now become a well-respected university. In India the Indira Gandhi National Open University was also given a national remit to co-ordinate the distance education offerings of conventional universities that were much older than IGNOU itself.

In Australia and New Zealand, Johnson (2003) records that in the 1960s when the UKOU was being developed in the United Kingdom, Australia had four universities that were providing opportunities for part-time higher education study using distance learning. Johnson also notes that at Massey University in New Zealand, approximately 12,000 students were enrolled in several hundred courses.

In Asia it was affirmed that almost all the countries in the continent have at least an open university. The most distinctive feature of these universities according to Daniel (1998) is their huge student populations. Daniel further expatiates this by noting that of the 11 mega-universities (universities with an enrollment of at least 100,000) that offer ODE in all parts of the world, seven are located in Asian countries: China, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Thailand, Iran and Turkey. Shive and Dirr (2001) also remarked that India now has more than ten open universities, Iran has two, Vietnam has two, mainland China has a national network of 43 Radio and Television University (RTVU) distance education universities and as many regional ones, and in some other countries the number of intakes doubles every year.

In North America, a good number of universities make great exploits in distance education. In the United States for instance, universities were among the first to have radio stations back in the 1920s. Universities extension programs were broadcast using these radios stations. Televisions became the medium of choice for the broadcast programs in the 1960s (Johnson, 2003). Shive and Dirr (2001) also note that the percentage of all colleges and universities that offer DL courses in the US grew from 33% in 1995 to 44% in the 1997/98 academic year. The number of course offerings has doubled in three years. Another 20% of institutions that did not offer DL options in that year indicated that they planned to initiate DL programme in the next three years. Total enrolments in DL courses were counted at 1,661,100 of which 1,363, 670 were credit courses (mostly at the undergraduate level)

In Africa, the distance teaching institution of the University of South Africa readily comes to mind. Boasting "a total student body (formal and non-formal) in the region of 250 000"

(University of South Africa (Unisa), 2006), the pioneering effort of the University of South Africa as a single mode distance education in Africa is widely acknowledged. The importance of distance education in Africa is underscored in a report by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA, 2002). It states that none of the countries in sub-Saharan African have fulfilled the promise of providing education to the entire population through the conventional education system. It is in this context that distance education is viewed as an appropriate method of education delivery. In this respect quite a sizeable number of countries in Africa embark on single, dual or mixed mode distance teaching institutions including Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, among others.

Whilst the major delivery methods for open and distance education programmes particularly in developing nations, may still rely on print and postal system, distance education remains a veritable weapon of mass education. With its delivery methods, education is taken to the door step of the learners - in their homes and various places of work. Thus worldwide, a viable opportunity is made available for people, who, for economic, domestic and other reasons, would have been permanently deprived of opportunities of learning and, or improving their educational qualifications.

Enhancing the quality of distance education: The fear

One significant constituent known in the traditional face-to-face education is the library. Library is also expected not to be found wanting in the delivery of its invaluable service to distance education programme. Indeed, library in academic institution prides itself as the back bone of academic venture, adding beauty and quality to education. The unapologetic belief in the academic world is that the quality of any form of education can only be enhanced when the provision of library facilities is given utmost priority. Traditionally libraries play a significant role of promoting and encouraging learning by supplying high-quality information services and facilities used by people seeking to learn. Indeed, the desirability and usefulness of library and its services in any academic programme is never a contentious issue. It is the significance of library in an academic setting and the possible absence or near absence of it in distance education programme that made some authors express some reservation for the quality of distance education programmes. In some quarters, fears have been expressed that the inability of some institutions to provide library support service to distance learners has partly accounted for the failure and drop out of some students who registered for distance programmes.

Expressing her strong belief in library as a support service Watson (1992) agrees with Kascus and Aguilar on their conviction that Library support is an integral part of quality education and a vital service that should be available to all students, whether on-campus or off-campus. Similarly, Kaye (1981) voices out his concern and declares that a student needs to have access to a well stocked library. He regrets that its absence is perhaps the single most serious limitation of distance education at the university level. In their own observation too, Burge, Snow and Howard (1988) also join the clamour and declare that poor library services will undermine the potential impact and effectiveness of distance education.

Of course the fears were not unfounded! The events in some distance teaching institutions confirmed the fears. A number of authors including Harry (1986), Watson (1997) and Oladokun (2002), among others, reiterate that when the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) came into existence in 1969, the university decided it was not going to have a library of its own to support the academic programmes for its distance learners. As if engaging in the policy of further bridging the gap between town and gown, the Open University (OU) directed the new university students to town to make use of the public libraries in the UK. This UKOU directive was a precedent that was soon to be mimicked by some other distance teaching institutions even in Africa. When Tanzania started its Open University (OUT) in 1993, possibly for reasons of shortage of funds, library facilities were, in the early years, not part of the initial bargain of the institution for its distance learners. As part of the survival strategies, Mmari (1997) indicates that students were directed to make use of the existing resources in both the public and private libraries in the country. Whilst imitating the UKOU model, the OUT seemed to gloss over the fact that the public libraries the UKOU directed its students to use had very well developed, organized, resourced and structured system that could and would support the students' needs. It was only a matter of time before the reality of inadequacy of the Tanzanian libraries confronted the authorities of the institution and the new Open University had to start begging donors for supply of books and journals.

Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services

For reasons of the rapidity with which distance education was becoming a major facet in higher education and the need for equity in library resources and services to learners of this programme, some library associations decided to develop guidelines that guarantee their library and information needs. Among such associations are those of America, Australia and Canada. The plight of off-campus students who experienced disadvantage because of non-availability of library resources was first noticed by the American Library Association (ALA) in 1931. Concern for this group of students therefore prompted the Association of College and Research Library (ACRL) of ALA to develop the guidelines for distance learning library services. The guidelines have been reviewed several times since they first appearance in 1967. According to ACRL (2004) the undergirding and uncompromising conviction of the guidelines is that library resources and services in institutions of higher education must meet the needs of all their faculty, students, and academic support personnel, regardless of where they are located.

For avoidance of doubt, the ACRL (2004) guidelines defines distance learning library services as those library services in support of college, university, or other post-secondary courses and programs offered away from a main campus, or in the absence of a traditional campus, and regardless of where credit is given. The phrase is inclusive of courses in all post-secondary programs designated as: extension, extended, off-campus, extended campus, distance, distributed, open, flexible, franchising, virtual, synchronous, or asynchronous. The ACRL (2004) philosophy of the guidelines among others, assumes the following precepts:

> Access to adequate library services and resources is essential for the attainment of superior academic skills in post-secondary education, regardless of where students, faculty, and programs are located.

Members of the distance learning community are entitled to library services and resources equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus settings.

The instilling of lifelong learning skills through general bibliographic and information literacy instruction in academic libraries is a primary outcome of higher education. Such preparation and measurement of its outcomes are of equal necessity for the distance learning community as for those on the traditional campus.

Because students and faculty in distance learning programs frequently do not have direct access to a full range of library services and materials, equitable distance learning library services are more personalized than might be expected on campus.

Effective and appropriate services for distance learning communities may differ from, but must be equivalent to, those services offered on a traditional campus.

Similarly in Canada, the Canadian Library Association (CLA) (2000) has among others, the following related assumptions, underpinning the guidelines for library support of distance learning:

Access to library resources is essential for quality in post-secondary education regardless of where the learners and programs are located.

Registered students and course instructors who are located away from the campuses of the originating institution are entitled to library and computer-based services as open and equitable as those provided for students and instructors on campus.

Because distant learners are often disadvantaged in terms of library access, equitable library services in this context may involve more personalized services than would be expected on campus. It cannot be assumed that traditional library services, designed to support on-campus users, will meet the information needs of individuals involved in distance learning.

The originating institution is responsible for ensuring that its distant learners have access to appropriate library resources, including resources associated with the Internet and World Wide Web.

Distant learners may choose to use local libraries for their academic needs, but if those libraries are unable or unwilling to provide the necessary support, the originating institution must be prepared to offer or arrange that support so the distant learner can acquire relevant resources or information.

The guidelines of the above two samples further provided some detailed information on management and administration, finances, personnel, facilities, resources and services that should be taken into consideration when an institution begins distance education programmes. In a similar fashion as ACRL guidelines, the CLA rolled out some services capable of enabling the information needs of the distance or distributed learners to be met. According to the CLA (2000), all students and instructors in the distance or distributed learning program, regardless of location or country, should have a means to:

consult with a librarian from the originating institution either in person, or by telephone, fax, e-mail, or some other means of electronic-mediated communication;

conduct subject and literature searches on course topics, either in person or through the services of a librarian acting as an intermediary at the originating institution;

request general reference assistance;

borrow or obtain access to recommended or supplementary readings or audio-visual materials;

access, from remote locations, the online catalogue of the originating institution and any bibliographic or full-text databases which may be mounted on the system or otherwise available through the originating institution;

access interlibrary loan services as required, in accordance with the regular library policies of the originating institution;

request the prompt delivery of library materials from the originating institution in cases where that material cannot be obtained easily and quickly through an unaffiliated library or by electronic means;

receive instruction or orientation in the use of libraries, library resources, or in automated library systems which are used for course-related research;

acquire basic information literacy skills to fulfil course requirements;

access other library facilities, resources, specialized reference staff, and services as required for the distance or distributed learning program;

provide feedback and comments to the originating institution regarding library services and resources.

From the examination of the guidelines developed for distance learners in some parts of the world, it is observed that no stone is left unturned in providing the required equity library services for distance learners. It is however regrettable that such guidelines or benchmarks on how libraries can appropriately deal with distance learners are not in place in developing countries, particularly in Africa. Watson (1997) declares that libraries in Third World countries lack the sophisticated approach found in developed countries. She further describes the absence of such management tools as a contributing factor to a low standard of information service to distance learners. It is however noteworthy that individual institutional library in these countries are alive to their responsibilities as they know the imperative need of adding quality to all the programmes floated by their parent institutions. Though they may not be thorough, some stand alone arrangements are made to assist the distance learners in meeting their library and information needs. In doing so, the libraries, in some cases modify the guidelines developed in advanced countries for their needs.

Current Practice: Technology in delivery

The struggle to ensure they are at the cutting edge of the demand of modern technologies, educational institutions seem to have been coerced to adopt strongly competitive delivery strategies. Institutions would want to seek efficiencies and effectiveness in the management and delivery of their programmes. The appeal presented to educational institutions by modern technology seems to make its application mandatory and adoption inevitable. The thought of this possibly prompts Madeleine Woolley (2004) – Director, Adelaide Institute of TAFE to declare that "there is a significant opportunity available to us all through the use of technology". She therefore counsels "we must recognize and act upon the increased prospects for access by

students to information and of major advances in outreach education for people who are currently under provided for". Thus from the use of Internet, Web Course Tools, television, computer mediated communications to tele- and video conferencing and other e-learning apparatus, various distance teaching institutions are universally on the move to get assisted in prompt and appropriate delivery of their programmes and services to their students.

As the technology is adopted in distance teaching and learning process, it is also adaptable in the dispensation of library and information service to the isolated and remote/distance students. As such the tyranny of distance imposed by this form of education has been effectively tackled. Indeed the application of ICT is seen as an integral part of the library and information dispensation. For instance Poulter, Tseng and Sargent (1999) advocate that in an increasingly technological society, providing Internet access, for instance, is seen by many as a natural extension of the library's remit to provide information, educational and leisure services to users.

Whilst ICT has been well entrenched in the delivery of services in academic institutions particularly in advanced countries of the world, a great deal of efforts have also been noticed in electronically advancing library resources and services to learners in their remote locations. Though the concept of ICT and educational technology has not fully emerged or absorbed everywhere in Africa, some giant leaps have been made in some African countries. It is heartwarming to note that some countries in Africa, like Botswana, South Africa among others, have impressive technological infrastructures with national and institutional policies to integrate the use of information and Communication technologies (ICTs) in education.

At the University of Botswana, a dual mode institution, a lot of investment has been made to effect the integration of information technologies to support flexible teaching and learning in its bid to produce students that are "independent, confident, self-directed, critical thinkers". According to Oladokun (2006) the University of Botswana has a clear institutional strategy for online teaching of students, combined with interactive video conferencing, e-learning and other educational technologies, to create virtual classroom learning experiences for its students. He adds that the number of online courses for the first semester of 2005/06 has grown to 131.

It is suffice to add the further development that virtually all the courses of the four Business Degree Programmes (BDP) operated by distance delivery mode in the university are now available in the WebCT. Hence, the distance learners with their individual passwords from anywhere in the world have the option of reading or downloading their modules from the WebCT. They can also reach their tutors, as well as chat with fellow course mates via the web. It is useful to note that the contents of Information Skills component of General Education Courses GEC 121/122, which the librarians teach are also uploaded in the WebCT and distance learners now have access to the modules online. Besides, the library database is accessible via the Internet. From the university library web page, it is possible to access several thousands of articles from electronic journals. The library systems also permit its users to have some self-help and self-service where borrowers can renew books borrowed either from within or outside the campus even when the library is closed. Patrons can view their records and also offer suggestions to the Library, online.

In South Africa, the home of the University of South Africa (UNISA) - one of the foremost and mega distance teaching institutions in the world, ADEA (2002) states that the use of technology is strongly supported by the government through its policy and other initiatives. In order to underscore its commitment about education policy and information technology, the Department of Education commissioned the TELI report (Technology – enhanced Learning in South Africa: A discussion document) and established an active National Centre for Educational Technology and Distance education in Pretoria. This Centre, according to ADEA, is responsible for co-coordinating and implementing plans for the use of technology in various institutions in the country.

At UNISA, a great effort has been seen towards making the institution a virtual university through, among others, the introduction of students on line (SOL), which enhances the nature of distance educational system. The institution also boasts of fully interactive tele- and videoconferencing operating in some of its centres/sites. A substantial progress is also noticeable with the Web-based information services in the library. On the UNISA Library web page there are "quick" links to some of the services rendered by the library. These include links to book requests, journal requests, subject databases, research gateways, clients with special needs, library instructions, contact a subject librarian etc.

Whilst it may not pose so much difficulty to use ICT in advanced countries of the world, the story is definitely not the same in the continent of Africa. For instance, the story is told of how the students in rural areas of New South Wales (NSW) Australia suffer substantial educational disadvantage compared with their metropolitan city counterparts. The disadvantage results in students being significantly less successful in the final high school examinations (the Higher School Certificate) and as a consequence, they have a substantially lower participation rate in higher education. In addressing this problem, Charles Sturt University – Australia established a web site that provides a rich educational resource for HSC students and teachers. The NSW HSC Online web site was established in 1997 and has grown to the largest educational website in Australia with over a million hits per month. The web site provides a model of how Internet technologies can be used to reach isolated students and break down the tyranny of distance and disadvantage.

In Africa, even in places like Botswana and South Africa where there might be best of intentions, there is a lot of concern in the effectiveness of using the technology by the distance learners. The electronic delivery of library and information services to these ubiquitous students is fraught with lots of difficulties in Africa. Among others, limited telecommunication infrastructure, unreliable supply of electricity, high and unaffordable cost of the necessary equipment to get connected to the Internet and the hardly affordable utility bills to settle, are issues to contend with.

Conclusion

Library and information service in any institution of higher learning is seen as a *sine qua non* to any quality academic programme. This service is generously made available to students in the traditional face-to-face setting. Distance learners deserve the same support from their institutions as that extended to on-campus students. Access to library resources and services should therefore

be an integral part of the educational experience of distance learners. In order to ensure equitable library service to distance learners as obtained in the conventional system, some guidelines have been laid out, albeit by some library associations in advanced countries of the world. Libraries of distance teaching institutions in the third world countries can borrow a leaf from these guidelines and, or develop their own, possibly at national or regional levels and ensure that what is good for the goose is not made forbidden for the gander even on parity basis.

In order to facilitate effective library and information service delivery to the ubiquitous distance students, the adoption and application of information and communication technologies is seen as inevitable. The statement of Madeleine Woolley (2004) – Director, Adelaide Institute of TAFE, on the use of technology deserves to be mentioned here. She warns that there is the potential for greater inequities to occur where those already advantaged widen the gap and increase the disadvantage through their use of their position and power. She concludes by counselling that the new technology must become an instrument of liberalization and not one of further extending the gap between the rich and the poor.

With the help of technology, it is possible that distance learners in advanced countries receive equitable library service with their traditional counterparts. While some efforts are being made by libraries of distance teaching institutions in Africa, the quality of library and information service presently offered to distance learners in most institutions is less than satisfactory. Indeed, there is no parity, equity or comparison in the service rendered to the two groups of learners. It is regrettable to note that in some African countries, the use of the Internet can hardly go beyond the capital cities when in fact, many of distance learners are located in remote and non-metropolitan areas. Libraries of distance teaching institutions would definitely require technological assistance to be able to effectively discharge their responsibilities to these learners.

There is no doubting the fact that application of technology gives enhancement to the delivery of service to distance learners and it should be cherished. It is however important to sound a note of caution that we should not think there are no other means of facilitating quality and effective delivery of library service. If necessary funds are made available and there is determination and commitment on the part of extension service librarians, quality service can still be rendered to distance learners. Even in advanced countries of the world, libraries do not depend entirely on technology as the only means of giving quality library service to distance learners. Postal services, collaboration with other libraries, establishing study centres with necessary infrastructures installed, and use of mobile libraries etc are some other methods used to provide quality service.

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