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# The Place of Library and Information Services in Open and Distance Learning in Nigerian Universities

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**THE PLACE OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES IN OPEN AND  
DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES**

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## **Abstract**

This paper emphasises about open and distance learning and the objectives as well as the rationale behind the establishment of open and distance learning. The characteristics of ODL as flexible, portable, transferable, relevant..., and identified the Universities that operate ODL programmes in Nigeria. It also analyses the important role played by library and information services in the open and distance learning in Nigeria. It aids information services in open and distance learning in the dissemination of information to distant learners such as registration of users, orientation/ user education, charging and discharging services, reference services, photocopying services, inter- library loan services, document delivery services, library automation, current awareness services, library guide, selective dissemination of information (SDI) and provision of library website/ links. Challenges such as lack of workout standard rules, lack of consistency of ICTs e – learning centres within the library, no laid down template from the National Universities Commission, lack of information literacy programme among ODL institutions and problem of electricity. The paper proffer remedies for effective services ranging from technical support, technological infrastructural facilities, virtual support programmes, partnership and collaboration and funding, since everything connected to open and distance learning is virtual online delivery and benefit to the distance learners - the library, its resources / information, facilities and services are made virtual for easy dissemination and retrieval of information, so the need for technical support cannot be over emphasised, fully equipped technological infrastructural facilities and resources, virtual supports programmes to enhance the library services to distant learners, partnership and collaborations from other libraries, and above all funding.

**Keywords:** Library and Information Services, Distance Learners, Open and Distance Learning, Nigerian Universities

## **Introduction**

The conventional system of education cannot accommodate all because of the increasing number of the needed individuals that want to improve their level of education. The open and distance education offers a unique opportunity for people that missed conventional educational opportunity an alternative means of acquiring education, that is convenient and regardless of the location. UNESCO (2002) stated that two main factors have led to an explosion of interest in distance learning: the growing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining; and the technological advances that have made it possible to teach more and more subjects at a distance.

In the same vein, South African Institute for Distance Education (2001) stated that open and distance learning is an approach to education which seeks to remove all unnecessary barriers to learning, while at the same time providing learners with a reasonable chance of success in an education and training system centred on their specific needs and located in multiple areas of learning. Ogunleye (2013) also emphasised that open and distance education should be regarded as a self-paced learning process which makes it possible for all categories of students to plan their study according to the time at their disposal.

Oblinger (2000) identified some rationale behind the establishment of open university education, as to expand access; alleviate capacity constraints; capitalising on emerging market opportunities and serving as a catalyst for institutional transformation. The increasing recognition of the open and distance learning was obvious, this prompted the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) through its national policy on education to detail the objectives of distance education as follows: provide more access to quality education and equity in educational opportunity; meet special needs of employers and employees by mounting special courses for employees at the workplace; encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula; ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilising Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work; and encourage life-long learning opportunities among others, as such meet the global competitiveness of standard of education.

The open and distance learning is also characterised by the following features flexible, portable, transferable, relevant, equivalent, accredited and also allows you to work from any location in the world without the need to attend lectures at a particular place; allows you to gain first class globally recognised academic qualifications with minimal disruption to your life and

work; suited to busy people who wish to increase their knowledge and skills because it makes possible the combination of study and career development.

### **Open and Distance Learning in Nigerian Universities**

Due to the emphasis on distance learning programme, most universities strive to have some of the distance education programmes in their educational system (Dual Mode). With this National Universities Commission (NUC) spelt out the needed criteria for the entire distance learning programme for quality assurance in order to produce a justifiable learning outcome. Universities that operate open and distance programme in Nigeria include: National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN); Distance Learning Centre, University of Ibadan (UI); Distance Learning Institute, University of Lagos (UNILAG); Centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education, University of Abuja (UNIABUJA); Centre for Distance Learning, University of Maiduguri (UNIMAID); Centre for Distance Learning, Obafemi Awolowo University(OAU) Ile-Ife; Centre for Distance Learning, Modibbo Adama University of Technology (MAUTECH) Yola; Ladoke Akintola University of Technology,( LAUTHECH) Open and Distance Learning Centre Ogbomosho and Distance Learning Centre, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria.

### **Library Use in Open and Distance Learning**

Everything connected to open and distance education is virtually online delivery and for the benefit of the distance learners, the library, its resources, facilities and services are made virtual for easy dissemination and retrieval. Digital information components are those accessible facilities which assist digital libraries for effective information dissemination and use by library patrons and distance learners inclusive. Its availability is of vital importance for enriching the libraries for digital information provision, dissemination and use. Ijeoma and Agwu (2015)

outlined the components of digital library among others as: a variety of system functions to coordinate, manage the entry and retrieval of digital information; database servers to handle remote requests; new users as well as existing local or distant database servers; organizational library system for serving groups of individuals. There are needs for distance learners to acquire new ICT skills to use these technologies to retrieve needed information. Digital Libraries and ICT have grown immensely to assist students through online retrieval services (OPAC) for information dissemination, retrieval and use. Owusu – Ansah and Bubuama (2015) avert that online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) has revolutionised the manner and ease with which distance learners can search traditional library collections and CD-ROM and online sources of information have greatly widened the range of resources libraries offer their end-users.

With the availability of digital libraries, Internet accessibility and other ICT facilities, there is the possibility of providing access links to electronic resources that increases the information needs satisfaction by distance learners. Electronic resources are those information / library resources that are in a digital format and can only be accessed through the computer or other ICT devices. The resources are of great value hence distance learners can on their own access information online. Konappa (2014) opined that electronic resources represent an increasingly important component of the collection building activities of libraries and are those materials that require computer access remotely via the Internet or locally. Such electronic resources available in the libraries are thus: e- books, e- journals, CD – ROM, e- patent, e- newspaper, OPAC, e- database, electronic theses and database among others. Quadri (2012) pointed out that many types of library materials such as journals, books, patents, newspapers, standards, photographs, pictures, motion pictures or music are now available in electronic or digital form and hold many advantages such as time and place convenience, timeliness, ability to

search directly, ability to link to further reading material and ability to disseminate and share information, which promote services in libraries.

### **Services of the University Library for Open and Distance Learners**

The services of the digital library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all users and there must be an agreed standard of services made available to distance learners for optimum use of information. Munchen (2001) stressed that to be successful in fulfilling its goals the traditional and digital library services must be fully accessible to all its potential users and any limitation of access, whether deliberate or accidental, will reduce the ability of the library to fully achieve its primary role of meeting the library and information needs of the community it serves. The library is an essential segment of a university which plays a significant role in achieving the objectives of higher education (Haider, 2004). Schneider (2001) pointed out that the “regional campus libraries play important and unique roles in the campuses and communities they serve”. The technological development in the last decade, specifically the Internet, has created many opportunities to distance learners (Argentati, 1999). The primary objective of the library is to acquire, store and make information available to all categories of students, faculty, tutors and full time employees of the university, all forms of recorded information in the fields pertinent to the objectives of the university; to support teaching, pursuit of research, and cooperate with other libraries in promoting the educational well-being of the community.

Since education has taken a new turn, and training become more important to the citizens as lifelong learners, open and distance education has the tendency to expand access to education at any point in time. Children, youth and adults who were excluded from conventional education because of age, work, family background, geographical distance and quota problems, catchment policy, insecurity and insufficient fund may be able to learn through open and distance learning

without any barrier. The libraries extend their services in aspects like, information dissemination with the aid of ICTs, time and hour of library services as such the distance learners can have access to information services of their various institutional sites at their will.

The library provides students support services of equal quality to both campus and distance learners by partnering with other libraries in distant areas where distance learners resides to provide support services, so as to coordinate learning in many distant sites to the benefits of the distant students. Cooperation among libraries would not be over emphasised, as such it served very important roles in regard to interlibrary loan services to distant learners. These services need to be supported by e-mail addresses and fax numbers allowing service to distance learners in hours convenient to them. Virtual or electronic libraries on the Internet become more comprehensive and are utilised where possible by instructors in course bibliographies and by students. Virtual Library for open and distance learners using a web based e-learning platform bring together the e-resources of various libraries and information services, both internal and external , all in one place, so users can find what they need quickly and easily. This will create a virtual library where all academic institutions can share e-resources.

In general, the role of libraries and librarians has not changed, but the tools used by library staff have changed. Librarians are still in the business of “....selecting, producing, providing access to, identifying, retrieving, organizing, providing instruction in the use of, and preserving recorded expression regardless of the format or technology. The library professional links people with information, knowledge, opinions and stories....” Providing library resources at a distance requires knowledge of copyright law. Creators of intellectual real estate require compensation or at least recognition for their work. Going to central storage locations such as libraries afforded a system that producers and users understood and have been in place over a



long period of time; library services at a distance will require the establishment of some new procedures to protect intellectual property. And the institutional libraries would have covered the gap, as such making information accessible to distance learners.

The library gives technical delivery systems which are oriented to the need of the students, to assess information resources in the library; items such as e-mail accounts, policy issues, directions for using listserves, steps needed to operate equipment and software, as well as other operational details available immediately when a student begins a learning experience and continue to be available as needed through manuals, help screens, as well as human support at learning centers.

User education programmes to distance learners have contributed immensely to promote effective and efficient information seeking skills among distance learners. As these programmes can take several forms of which include: off peak and out of hour user education tutorials and library skills documentation.

Distance learners have characteristics which Akintayo and Bunza (2000) listed as adults with professional responsibilities (jobs), social responsibilities (families), study part time, limited formal education or are a long time away from formal education, highly and intrinsically motivated and who are interested in practical results for career, occupation or life style. Sacchanand (2002) reported that distance learners characteristics are different from students in traditional universities. Their characteristics were listed as: adult learners, mature employed, have family responsibilities, higher motivation, and are willing to take responsibility for their own education. Other includes: clear cut goals, self-directed, study on independent basis, learning in a variety of ways, take control over their learning and often experience a feeling of isolation and remoteness from other students. Distance learners access library and educational

resources and services in various ways Sacchanand (2002). Access can be directed e.g. face to face, or mediated by printed materials e.g. manuals, brochure or mediated by technology using a variety of media such as telephones, radio, the Internet etc. Successful direct access to information is characterised by flexibility, reliability, availability, user-friendly, portability, efficiency and service ability (Sacchanand 2002). Kavulya (2004) in his study of distance education in four universities in Kenya opined that some of the students have little or no exposure to library use and this affects their access to library resources. Effective and appropriate services to distance learning communities may differ from, but must be equivalent to those services offered on a traditional campus ACRL (1998). In a study on library use and services by distance learners in three Nigeria universities by Mabawonku (2004), it was found that many of the students attributed their low use of the library to their tight schedules which were fully occupied with lectures and interactions with lecturers. This may affect their library use and subsequently their optimal use of library. To further enhance the usage of library and its services by distance learners irrespective of these challenging characteristics of location, lack of sufficient time to consult the physical library which makes the listed services below very pertinent to open and distance learners:

- i. **Registration of Users:** This is a way of taking record of all the bona fide users of a library by registration. Distance learners do register with the parent university library, which through the technology gives them the edge to use both the library resources and the facilities. The provision of library services to distance learners has been improved by the work of technology and accessibility of information enhanced. (Igwe, 2014).

- ii. **Orientation / User education:** Library orientation for distance learners is a way of creating awareness to the use of Library and its services. It could be available through e-mail, e- bulletin, e- lectures, e- seminars and e- workshops among others.
- iii. **Charging and Discharging services:** This is a service in the library that involves the borrowing of library materials to users and returning of same when due. It gives an added opportunity for users to extend their usage of the material. This is more useful to distance learners, as such have more material at their pace for their use, even in their various offices and locations. Also borrowing and service arrangements can also be made with libraries in other locations
- iv. **Reference Services:** Various technologies has improve reference services to distance learners, Many libraries use electronic information communication as the medium to receive queries from students making it possible for students to use e-mail and other information access as a means of sending and receiving information related to their needs.
- v. **Photocopying services:** This service is a support services in the library to enable users to duplicate some information they want to make use –of outside the library, and this service is vital to distance learners, as it makes resources available to them at that short period of making use of the library.
- vi. **Inter- library Loan Services:** This is a service in the library that provides an opportunity for the user to have access to information from other libraries through the influence of the learner’s library. As distance learners lack time, the librarian can provide access to certain information through other libraries.

- vii. **Document Delivery Service (DDS):** It is a sort of help services to users especially distance learners to request for information and it will be provided. Many academic libraries that support distance learning programs provide document delivery services to students with the opportunity to order material held in stock for their use.
- viii. **Library Automation / Digitization:** The digitalisation of information makes it possible to take library and information services to distance learners regardless of their geographical location. It gives them opportunity of using on-line catalogues (OPACs), to search databases, examine abstracts to access needed information and as well-read full text documents.
- ix. **Current Awareness Services (CAS):** This is creating a corner in the library for current news and bulletin for library users. It could be in form of e- news, e- journals etc. on current issues and made available to distance learners for their information need.
- x. **Library Guide/Regulation:** This Library guide and regulation contain the official activities of the library- opening and closing hours of the library which is always made available to library users, as such it will guide the distance learners on what is obtainable in the library.
- xi. **Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI):** As information is a very vital instrument, this has to do with the provision of special packaged information for a special group / user. It is highly useful in addressing the information needs of a chosen target groups (distance learners) which can be achieved through librarians' engagement in relevant area for perceived needs. Nkiko and Iroaganachi (2015)

noted that this is a concept that is popular among academic libraries which entails creating a database of users' profiles including their teaching and research interests and making available to them unsolicited but relevant information geared towards facilitation of swift accomplishment of their designated goals.

- xii. **Provision of Library Website and Links:** This service will be of great importance to the distance learners, where websites and proper channels / links are provided for their access to information. Watson (2000) inferred that distance students must have the ability to access library and information services when, where and how they choose e.g. late at night, early in the morning, during weekends and holidays.

Obtaining information quickly is the main concern of the users and that is one of the goals of a library, thereby satisfying the user's needs. Yi (2016) opined that Information Technologies (IT) change rapidly and information products and services are in a multiplicity of formats in libraries. He also stressed that for libraries and information services to stay visible, it is important that they adopt strategies/ services to help meet the mission/ goal of its objective and user's need met. Certainly, the open and distance learners in Nigeria have information needs that ought to be met by the libraries of their parent institutions.

### **Challenges of Library Services Delivery to Open and Distance Learners.**

In spite of the enthusiasm generated by the new thrust in open and distance education, overall problems that may impede library and information services of the institutions are better understood and proper implementations are taken care of. These problems are discussed as follow.

Lack of workout standard rules to initiate a committee of librarians and academics from various library science schools to establish educational material of high quality which will be helpful to overcome the shortage of appropriately-designed self-instructional materials to support teaching and learning among distant learners and this poses a challenge to provide efficient library support to the distance learners Agim (2015).

Lack of consistency in programme/policy implementation is another challenge. It is a known fact that success in any educational policy is contingent on the involvement of all stakeholders and sponsorship of funding agency, that is, the government. A succeeding government truncated the attempt at Open University in the early 80's. Thus, successive governments in Nigeria must not only allow the continuation of open and distance education programme, it must be supported through adequate funding (Yusuf, M.O. 2006), as this will alongside develop their libraries to assist distance users in the quest for their knowledge.

The challenges of ICTs e-learning centres/trainings within the libraries posed a barrier for libraries to complement their services; non availability of library automation alongside provision of Web OPAC resources in the libraries, as such the libraries are not easily accessible to the tutors and distance learners in remote areas of the country.

No laid down template from the National Universities Commission (NUC) or any other library organisation in the country has provided adequate guidelines or policies for library services to distance users; as such this impedes services to the distance learners and development of infrastructure of libraries of the universities offering distance learners services.

Lack of information literacy programme among open and distance learning institutions poses a barrier to distance learners in the awareness and use of library and information services of their host institutions.

Problem of electricity: Since successful distance library and information services cannot be assured without the use of communication and technological tools (e-mail, fax, internet, television, radio, etc.), then the problem of electricity comes into focus. Several rural areas in Nigeria are yet to have electricity, while the urban areas experience epileptic power supply, in the dissemination of services using the communication tools to distance learners and learners' ability to have access to constant power supply to adequately utilise information resources from the libraries. This will create problems for effective integration of most technological media in the delivery of library services. Poverty among Nigerians makes alternative sources of electricity non-visible to most Nigerians.

These problems if not addressed will always pose as a challenge to adequate implementation of library and information services in open and distance learning institutions in Nigeria. Therefore, efforts should be intensified to improve electricity, telecommunication and other communication facilities in both urban and rural areas.

### **Prospects of Effective Library and Information Services to Open and Distance Learners in Nigeria.**

In spite of all these challenges, there is still hope of effective library and information services to open and distance learners in Nigeria Universities. The prospects hinge on:

**Technical Support** is needed in libraries where internet systems are involved or extensive use is made of computer networks. At least five kinds of technical assistance are necessary:

- i. helping in planning for technology uses and acquisitions
- ii. providing training on how to use new hardware and software

- iii. providing demonstrations and techniques on how to incorporate technology into instruction
- iv. providing on-demand help when software problems or hardware failures arise; and
- v. performing low-level maintenance on the system.

Altogether, the various technical assistance are expected to enhance library services to open and distance learning institutions, ICT based services dominate the services rendered to distance learning students by library staff; they have become providers of technical support (Hulshof, 1999); and they have been transformed from “information gatekeepers” to “information gateways” Haricombe (1998). Lippincott (2002:4) advocates librarian’s involvement in learning communities: “The librarians can shift the focus from explaining library resources to meeting the on-going information needs of the students in the broad information environment”.

In responding to the need to provide on-going online library support, librarians have worked at translating what they do in a traditional library into virtual or digital environments, while customising their services and resources for e-learners (distant learners). Traditionally, libraries offer circulation services, interlibrary loans, course reserves, an information desk, a reference desk, and library instruction, to serve learners connected to their institutional library primarily through a computer network, librarians are providing remote access to, and electronic delivery of, library resources, and are using communication technologies to deliver electronic reference services and instructional support.

**Technological Infrastructural Facilities:** Library and library services for open and distance learning environment must be equipped with digital/electronic contents, created and powered by e-learning portals, Internet technology used to connect users where the library



students can login, access materials necessary course materials format – text, data, graphics, images, animations, sound can be accessed by students.

**Virtual Support Programmes:** Virtual support programmes can enhance university library services to open and distance learners. Library services to distant learners in open and distance learning institutions can become interactive by providing links to discussion forums, email and file transfer thus allowing communication between users and librarians. Virtual/digital library services will provide environment in which librarians and users are not physically present, but the users can access library resources from remote site at an individual's convenient time with provision of interactive tools like chats. Librarians and users can virtually meet online, in the interest of the users.

**Partnership and collaboration:** The need for distance learners to use other academic libraries effectively, they ought to be properly informed of their relevant available resources, opening hours and services rendered. This can be actualised through a partnership between libraries in the study centres for the distant learning schemes and the existing academic libraries in Nigeria.

**Funding:** Through proper funding for the library as a whole, ICT knowledge services could be expanded by creating e-learning centres and also using e-library to deliver library services and make library facilities available to the distance learners. It is, however, necessary that the government/institutional bodies provides adequate funding and necessary infrastructure, so as to make the library fulfil its organisational obligation of serving users irrespective of whether they are conventional students or distant learners.

## **Summary/Conclusion**

Librarians are specialists in the acquisition, organization, retrieval, and dissemination of information. The librarian's role will still include selection, providing access to resources, offering instruction and assistance to patrons in using resources, and preserving information most especially as it regards distance learners. Librarians will still be representing issues of access to information to governments and other decision-making bodies of open and distance learning institutions. In providing access to information, the librarian in the virtual institutional environment must consider the requirements of any digital resources - any hardware or software necessary, the most effective way to refer distance patrons to the resources, and whether availability is limited to their user group. Technical competencies shall be needed. Skills such as creating web pages, building and maintaining computer networks, designing search interfaces are sought after in today's library employment market, greater demand for professional staff with either computing or librarian qualifications, partnership/collaboration among libraries should be encouraged, as proper funding is an over-all enhancement of achieving proper dissemination and retrieval of information to open and distant learning students. In conclusion the paper discussed elaborately the enhanced services provided by libraries to distance learners in Nigerian universities. Without much ado, the objectives of the library support for distance learners depend largely on the identification of the information needs and services requirements of the learners, as such the library have assume a new roles in rendering information services to distance learners irrespective of their specialty as a non-conventional students that must have access to information and resources in the library. The library and it parent institutions will ensure the access to the riches of the world of information and increasingly as disseminate that information to users and distant learners irrespective of location. It is therefore expected that the issues raised

in this paper will be taken with interest by Nigerian universities and stakeholders in the educational system, as this will fully equip every distance learners after school. The seriousness/interest will be further displayed by securing additional funding/technological infrastructures for the provision of information for the Open University Systems in Nigeria.

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