THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN SUPPORTING OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the role of academic libraries in supporting distance education in Nigeria with particular reference to Ladoke Akintola University of Technology Open & Distance Learning center. The specific objectives of this study were to investigate the information needs, available library resources & services; and the impediments to access library resources. Questionnaire was used as the research instrument. The study targets all distance learners of the Centre. A sample size of 200 respondents was selected through random sampling. The data collected was analyzed using frequency tables and percentages. Findings of the study revealed that; library support services for the distant learners are a key to successful learning programs, distance learners need information mainly to accomplish their academic activities, and to advance their career. Challenges mitigating access to library resources and services include students' sole reliance on course materials and lecture notes; lack of information literacy skills, inadequate library facilities, lack of access to relevant information materials for their courses of study and lack of time due to their busy schedule at work. . Based on the findings, it was recommended that; fully equipped technological infrastructural facilities and resources should be provided in the university's library to enhance the library services to distant learners. There is need for the university library to provide more library resources and services such as digitized collections and virtual supports programmes that are fully accessible remotely to all its potential users.

Keywords: Academic libraries, open and distance learning, Nigeria, University,

INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning is the process of training and learning through the Internet. It implies classes and exercises via the Internet, CD or DVD menu, consultation with tutors through the Internet, e-mail flow between participants, forums, Internet testing, video conferences and so on. Distance education brings the resources

and educational opportunities of academia to the learners' desktop but proper planning must be done beforehand to ensure a quality experience for the students. Academic libraries are instrumental players in this work because provision of library services is an essential part of the learning process at any university community. This was confirmed by Oladukun and Aina Oladukun, (2009), whose study reported that library support services are an essential tool and should be given priority before any institution begins any open and distance learning programmes. This was also supported by Block, (2016) who stated that academic libraries' contributions in shaping the research components of all courses are vital to under girding the student's research skills to produce college level papers and research projects. When faced with these tasks, it is often the library where the student seeks advice and consultation. However, most universities do not see the need for library services to the distance learners. Hence, this paper looks at the role of academic libraries in supporting distance education in Nigeria with particular reference to Ladoke Akintola university of Technology.

Ladoke Akintola University of technology's involvement in open & distance learning education dates back to October, 12 2015. At the inception, the National University Commission (NUC) granted license to operate B. Sc Computer Science Programme only but after a year, on August 12 2016, approval was also granted for establishment of three (3) additional prgrammes. As at date, 5 departments are involved with a total students' population of over 5000 under the programmes. The centre has students in different countries such as Canada, United Kingdom, India, South Africa Saudi Arabia and Qatar studying the approved programmes. The students participate in online participation and examination through technological driven means using the same academic calendar as those on the prgramme in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Education in Nigeria is a national agenda and the Nigerian Government has stressed this point through its many national development plans. The ever-continuing growth in Nigeria's population, the need to provide education for all, irrespective of environmental, social or cultural circumstances has become a necessity for the country expand access to education in order to meet the growing needs of university education. Due to this growth, it is more important than ever that library services be readily available to support this category of learners. As most universities in Nigeria have started running open and distance learning (ODL) programmes, it has been observed that most of these students do not have access to the main campus libraries. It has also been observed that librarians have not been involved as much as they should have been in the planning of these programmes.

Meanwhile, (Niemi, Ehrehard & Neeley, (1998); Ojedokun (2000) asserted that access to adequate library services and resources is essential regardless of where students, faculty, and programs are located and that 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. In view of this, this study seeks

to investigate the role played by academic libraries in Nigerian Universities to support distance education using Ladoke Akintola Universities of Technology, Ogbomoso, Nigeria as a case study. Findings of this study will provide an insight on how librarians and other information providers can understand distance learners' needs and how these needs can be met. It will also provide base line data that can be used to promote the provision of library and information services for teaching and learning for distance learners.

Objectives of the Studies

The main objective of the study is to determine the role played by academic libraries to support open and distance learning courses while the specific objectives are:

to investigate the information needs of distance learning students in Nigerian universities;

to examine how the information needs of these students are met by the libraries;

to investigate the challenges confronting the Nigerian distance learning students in accessing library resources.

3.1 Research Questions:

This study was guided by the following research questions;

What are the information needs of distance learning students in Nigerian universities libraries?

What library services are offered to distance learning students at the university's libraries?

What are the barriers to information sources access by the distance learners?

Review of Related Literature

Library services for distance education students began to take on a higher profile, leading to an increase of literature addressing surrounding issues. Earlier literature on library services to distance education students focused on issues of quality and accreditation of distance education programmes in higher education (Simmons, 1991, Tiwari, 2011) A number of studies have been conducted by many researchers to evaluate library services to distance education students. For example, Tipton, (2001) reported a survey of graduate students at remote sites conducted at Texas in 1999 to assess the library support services for distance learning within the Texas University system. In particular, the study sought to determine the extent to which distant graduate students were aware of library services offered to students at remote sites, and the extent to which the graduate students perceived that their information needs were met. The study focused on the distance learners' satisfaction levels with library support services, and assessed the students' use patterns. The study revealed that students were

not utilizing library services and resources to their full potential. The study thus, recommended better user orientation to services, as well as provision of instruction and searching methods to support distance learners.

Cassner and Adams surveyed distance librarian administrators at Association of Research Libraries (ARL) to identify library resources and services being offered to distance learners. Of the 112 member libraries surveyed, 73 libraries participated in answering questions pertaining to access and delivery options, models of staffing, and collaboration of libraries with distance teaching faculty (Cassner & Adams, 2004). Sixty nine percent of the respondents do offer distance learning library services. These services included a dedicated web page to distance learners, delivery of electronic resources, interlibrary loan, online reference assistance such as E-mail and virtual chat, and library instruction via online tutorials. Additionally, the majority of respondents indicated their library staff members, as a whole unit, serve the needs of both on-campus and distance learners. In another study on library services support for distance learners, it was reported that the most common library services offered to distance learners include: Remote access to online library catalog, electronic databases, electronic books and journals, online information literacy tutorials, electronic research guides on academic and special interest topics, electronic general library guides, ask-a-librarian (chat, e–mail, or 19 telephone), interlibrary loan, electronic reserves, and document delivery services. (Raraigh-Hopper, 2009).

Hightower, Rawl, and Schutt, (2008) conducted a similar study at the Auburn University in Montgomery. Limiting their scope to a single university campus, the researchers used an online survey, follow-up interviews, and an examination of the library's server log to assess current faculty practices of delivering the library to students using WebCT. Of the 102 surveys distributed, only 29 faculty (28%) responded. Twenty-two of the 29 respondents did not integrate library resources. Seventy-seven percent (17 out of 22) of these non-integrators indicated a willingness to do so. Faculty argued that the librarians must be proactive in their efforts to encourage and educate faculty about their library and the ways in which the library's resources and services can be integrated into WebCT courses.

The study of Hensley and Robin (2010) on distance learners in University of Illinois concluded that distance learners at the University generally appreciate the library and make use of the services and resources to satisfy their information needs but the scope of library services accessed is limited. On the other hand, Aliakbar *et al.,* (2009), in a study conducted on distance learners in Iran reported that although distance learners had positive perception toward the use of information resources, the University had no formal library services for the students to use during their study.

The study of Larson and Owusu-Acheaw (2016), focused on the information needs of distance learners of the Winneba Study Centre of the University of Education, Winneba. The main objective was to investigate the information needs of this group of students who live far away from their host institution and have minimal interaction with

their tutors. The study was a survey and made use of a questionnaire as research instrument. The target population consisted of all distance learners of the Centre; this includes the Diploma and Post Diploma students numbering 1,029 as at 2014/2015 academic year. A sample size of 206 representing 20% of the population was selected through random sampling. The questionnaire was analyzed using frequency tables and percentages. Findings of the study were that distance learners depend solely on the course materials and lecture notes as the only source of information due to their tight schedule.

Chawinga and Zozie (2016) investigated information needs and barriers to information sources by ODL students by addressing three objectives. A survey questionnaire with a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions was distributed to 350 students to find out the information sources and challenges that the ODL students face when searching for information to accomplish their academic activities. The findings, all 258 (100%) students who answered the questionnaire need information to prepare for the end-of-semester examinations. Information sources that are used most by students include lecture notes, Internet and library books with scores of 238 (92.6%), 207 (80.5%) and 199 (77.4%), respectively.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The target population of the study were undergraduate distance learning students of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso, Nigeria. A random sample of 200 respondents were administered the questionnaire and a total of 164 (82%) were retrieved. A structured questionnaire was used to gather data from the respondents so as to limit their responses to some stated alternatives. The design of the questionnaire was guided by the literature review and previous survey questionnaires used in similar studies. The questionnaire was submitted to some experts in the field of library science to ensure its face validation. A four Likert-type scale was also used with end points of -4- 'Strongly Agree (SA)', and -1- 'Strongly Disagree (SD)'; the two midpoints are -3- 'Agree (A)' and -2- 'Disagree (D)'. The U – Undecided position was excluded from the response in order to extract a specific response from the respondents, also, to avoid the distortion of results. A test re-test reliability method using coefficient alpha was adopted to determine the reliability of each of the identified variables. The response received were tabulated, analyzed and interpreted in the light of objectives of the study by applying descriptive statistics supported by the SPSS computer assisted data analysis software.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Demographic Distribution of the respondents is as represented below:

Table 1:

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	78	48 %
Female	96	52 %
Total	164	100 %

Table 2:

Age	Frequency	Percentage
16-25	28	17%
25-35	47	29%
36-45	79	48%
47-55	10	6%
55 and above	-	-
Total	**164**	**100**

Tables 1 and 2 show that 78 (48 %) were males while 96 (52%) were females; this indicates that distance education programs are being undertaken by both male and female. The Table also reveals that majority of the students under study fall between the age of 36 and 45 years which is an indication that majority of them are matured students. This is followed by 47 (29 %) aged between 25 and 35, this implies that young people could also undertake open and distance learning programme.

Information Needs of the Distance Learning Students

Research question 1 sought to establish the Information Needs of the Distance Learning Students. Responses of the students as regard their information needs is as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Information Needs of the Distance Learning Students

Information needs	Frequency	Percentage
Information relevant to their course of study	156	79.4
Information on sponsorship for further education	95	61.3
Information on job and business opportunities	108	64.1
Information on career development	102	62.9
Information on Politics	65	47.4
Information on entertainment	35	26.8

Note: Multiple Responses

Table 3 gives an overview of the information needs of the respondents. The table shows that majority of the students 156 (79.4 %) need information on various information materials relating to their courses of study while 108 (64.1%) search for information relating to job and business opportunity. Moreover, 95 (61.3%) indicated their interest is in seeking information on sponsorship for further education. On the other hand, 102 (62.9%) are interested in information relating to career advancement. Respondents that indicated their interest in seeking information on politics 65 (47.4%) entertainment 35 (26.8%) received the lowest frequency, respectively. Thus, this implies that the distance learners need information to accomplish their career goals and academic activities such as assignments, Quiz, examinations and research projects. This study also points out the fact that larger percentage of the distance learning students are matured set of students who are returning to academia to obtain additional education for upward mobility or career change. It was not unexpected for the study to register 35 (26.8%) learners who seek information on entertainment; this implies that most of the distance learners are eager to learn without distractions.

Library Services Offered to Distance Learning Students at the Universities Libraries

Research question 2 sought to establish the services offered to distance learning students at the university's libraries. To answer this research question, the researcher used the responses to the four items that measure responses of the students as regard the services offered by the library. This is as depicted in Table 4.

Table 4: Library Services Offered to Distance Learning Students at the Universities Libraries

S/N	Statement	SA	A	SD	D
1	The library offers reference and research Guide	55 (33%)	79 (48%)	20 (12%)	10 (6%)
2	The library organizes Users' orientation	150 (91 %)	10 (6%)	2 (1.5%)	2 (1.5%)
3	Provision of electronic & print Resources, electronic databases	78 (47.5%)	52 (32%)	30 (18%)	4 (3%)
4	Provision of Internet Facilities	80 (49%)	24 (15%)	30 (18.2%)	30 (8%)
5	Provision of Circulation services	67 (41%)	73 (45%)	14 (9%)	10 (6%)

Table 4 shows that (81 %) of the respondents reported that the library offers reference services while (18 %) disagree. Also, 97.7% of them agreed that the library organizes users' orientation while 3% disagree. In addition, 79 % agreed that the library provide both electronic and print resource for their academic activities while 21%

disagree. This result is an indication that the library provides active learning support to distance learners.

Barriers to utilization of Library Information Resources and Services

Research question 3 sought to establish the barriers associated with utilization of Library Information Resources and Services offered to distance learning students at the university's libraries. To answer this research question, the researcher used the responses to the four items that measure responses of the students as regard the services offered by the library. This is as depicted in Table 5.

Table 5: Barriers to utilization of Library Information Resources and Services

Barriers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Reliance on course materials and lecture note	85	52
Lack of information literacy skills	46	28
Inadequate library facilities	10	6.1
Lack of access to relevant information materials for their courses of study	9	5.4
Lack of time due to busy schedule at work	14	8.5

This table shows that majority of the students 85 (52 %) rely heavily on course materials and lecture notes. Other barriers include Lack of information literacy skills 46 (28 %); Inadequate library facilities 10 (6.1%); Lack of access to relevant information materials for their courses of; study 9 (5.4%); Lack of time due to busy schedule at work 14 (8.5 %). This result shows that significant numbers of students depend on their lecture notes to write assignment, test and examination, thereby, they do not see the need to make use of library materials. The results also show that the students lack information literacy skills, especially when it comes to retrieving, evaluating and using information independently from the internet.

Discussion of findings

Contrary to the findings of Chawinga and Zozie 2016, that girls stay at homes doing house chores, and marry at a young age and are thus rarely given an opportunity to do their studies up to the university level, this study has established the fact that female enrolment has increased in Nigerian public universities as there are more female students than male. Findings of this study are in line with Boadi and Letsolo (2004), in a study conducted in Botswana, they found that majority of the students were female because of the flexibility of the program. This study also found that both the young and old could be enrolled on the program. This result validates the findings in one of the previous studies (Valentine 2014), where it was noted that both the young and old could be enrolled on the open and distance learning programme.

The study shows that majority of the students need information on various information materials relating to their courses of study while the study also revealed

that a significant number of respondents are interested in information relating to career advancement. This finding confirms an earlier study by Valentino (2015), who found that distance learning students utilize library resources for opportunities and career development. Furthermore, this study found that types of resources and services offered to distance learning library patrons are circulation services, reference and research, internet service, user education and provision of print and electronic resources. This is in line and consistent with the study of Raraigh-Hopper (2009) who found that the most common library services offered to distance learners include: Remote access electronic databases; electronic books and journals; electronic research guides on academic and special interest topics; electronic general library guides; and ask-a-librarian. It is note-worthy to say that User education programmes/orientation to distance learners would contribute immensely to the promotion of effective and efficient information seeking skills among distance learners.

Moreover, it was also found that majority of the students rely solely on their lecture note and course materials, thereby, they do not see the need to use library resources to support their academic activities. This was evidenced by 52 % of the respondents who indicated that they used just their course materials to support their studies. Meanwhile, Oladokun (2010) remarked that it does not sound desirable for the tertiary level students to depend on lecture notes in order to write assignment, test and examination or obtain the needed information. Possible reason why students consider their lecture note/course material as the only option could be due to the fact that they do not have adequate time to access the university library resources. However, it is important to mention that as university administrators are expanding their institutions' educational programmes beyond the campus boundaries; they need to provide their students with access to library resources and services. This finding supports the earlier studies of Adetimirin and Omogbue, (2002) and Oladokun, (2014) who found that distance students were not using library because of their tight schedules which were fully occupied with lectures.

Meanwhile, Larson and Owusu-Acheaw, (2016), opined that use of information resources for independent study and learning makes the distance education program of the same standard and quality like the regular program. Findings of this study also reflect that the distance learning students do not undergo formal information literacy training. This is in line with the study of (Chawinga and Zozie, 2016,) who noted that distance learning students needed to be equipped with necessary skills for print and non-print materials. A study by Oladokun and Aina (2009) also found that lack of information literacy skills stymied students' access to academic information. Thus, the current study together with that of Oladokun and Aina (2009) and Chawinga and Zozie, (2016) support claims that lack of adequate information literacy skill could dibber distance learning students from utilizing the resources in the library more effectively due to their inability to search for information independently.

CONCLUSION

This research has provided preliminary information that can help enhance library services to distance learning students. Findings reported are similar to those of

earlier studies conducted to assess the role of academic library in promoting open and distance learning programme. According to the findings, it is clear that library support services for the distant learners are a key to successful learning programs. Through active library support services, distance learners are able to have access to a wide range of library services such as reference and circulation services, electronic databases, electronic books and journals, electronic research guides on academic, and ask-a-librarian. This study further revealed that the students need information mainly to accomplish their academic activities, and to advance their career. A number of challenges mitigating access to library resources and services were also identified. Students' sole reliance on course materials and lecture notes is the number one barrier to the use of library resource; followed by other barriers which include; lack of information literacy skills, inadequate library facilities, lack of access to relevant information materials for their courses of study and lack of time due to their busy schedule at work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Fully equipped technological infrastructural facilities and resources, to enhance the library services to distant learners should be provided in the University's library.

There is need for the university library to provide more library resources and services such as digitized collections and virtual supports programmes that are fully accessible remotely to all its potential users.

Library management should ensure that the library is stocked with current materials relevant to the needs of the students.

There is need for introduction of Information Literacy course (s), in order to equip students with necessary skills to effectively identify access and evaluate accurate and reliable information for problem solving and decision making.

Library management should provide guidance/instructions on how to access and utilize library electronic resources in order to enhance students' learning. This could be inform of library tour and orientation usually organized for fresh students. It could also be made available through e-mail, e- bulletin, e- lectures, e- seminars and e- workshops among others.

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