

DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The number of candidates seeking admission into Nigerian Universities is increasing yearly; many applications get turned down on grounds of lack of facilities and space to accommodate them, thereby dashing their hopes and aspirations. In order to assuage the frustration of these applicants, Distance Learning was introduced to serve as an alternative to those who could not gain admission into the universities of their choice. Just like their conventional campus-based counterparts, the Distance Education Learners need adequate library services in order to succeed in their academic pursuit. This paper assesses the expected contributions of the National Library of Nigeria via digital information in library service to the successful implementation of Distance Education programmes in the country.

INTRODUCTION

The zeal for gaining admission into institutions of higher learning in Nigeria is becoming a social problem for societal values and development. Year in year out, the demand for admission into the universities by qualified candidates has hardly been met. Therefore, the Distance Learning scheme, introduced many years back seems a wise decision, taken at the right time.

With more advances in information and computer technology, new ideas and modalities have arisen to enhance the concept of offering education to anyone, anywhere, anytime through digitization. Cronis (1998) defines digital as the representation of the sequence of discrete symbolic values, each of them having two or more unambiguously distinguishable states so that they can, at least, in principle be accessed, manipulated, copied, stored, and transmitted entirely through mechanical

ways with high reliability. Digitization of library simply means the process of converting library material resources, such as books, serials, monographs, conference or seminar/workshop papers, articles and non-print materials into electronic format to disseminate information to library users. Doing this will greatly increase the accessibility, availability and contents' preservation and conservation of library materials for generations to come.

Educom Staff (1996) illustrates the concept of delivering course materials of Distance Learning as a shifting role from the physical classroom, where all instructions are face-to-face, to the virtual classroom, where direct tutorial contact between student and teacher, student and student is non-existent. In line with the above, libraries have, therefore, shifted from being repositories of print and non-print materials to hybrid instructions, provisions and access to digital information.

Since many universities have embarked on Distance Learning and offered undergraduate degree courses via virtual classroom, a consortium of Library services is necessary. The platform for promoting and implementing Distance Learning as a viable alternative to conventional classroom instructions is the challenge the National library of Nigeria needs to tackle in this era of digital information age.

AN OVERVIEW OF DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA

Distance Learning is no longer a new phenomenon in Nigeria. Research has it that Distance Learning began in Nigeria in the 1940s through correspondence courses. Many elite Nigerians obtained various certificates and scholarships through it. They studied successfully to pass the General Certificate of Education examinations (GCE), at Ordinary and Advanced Levels, through correspondence studies. The course materials were mailed by post to the students and arrived in Nigeria during the space of time. This continued until some Nigerian Universities started the Part-Time or Distance Learning Programmes through their Institutes of Education.

Since the localization of the programmes, different names, such as Sandwich programmes, Satellite Campus Programmes, Part-Time Programmes, External-Degree-Course Programmes, among others, have been invented and given by the individual universities that offer the

programmes. However, over population, unemployment, poverty, and other socio-economic factors in the country have further compounded the problems of universities' admissions yearly, in spite of the increasing number of Federal, State and private universities. This has rendered the programme counter-productive.

With the new phase of the Distance Learning currently embarked upon in the University system in the country, coupled with the resuscitation of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) with adequate provision of library services, the Distance Education programmes will, if well implemented, soon become second-to-none in this country.

STATUTORY FUNCTIONS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION POLICY

The National Policy on Education (NPE) is explicit on what it refers to as Distance Learning. It describes it as a system which encompasses education for all; education for life; life-long learning; life-wide education; adult education; mass education; universal education; media-based education; virtual classroom education; self-learning education; personalized learning; part-time studies etc. The objectives of Distance Education cannot be achieved easily without the supporting aids of education such as libraries, materials for instruction-based media formats, audio-visual equipment, funding and human resources.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) describes education as the most important instrument of change in any society. It further says that any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution; that the Federal Government shall make life-long education the basis for the nation's education policy and that, at any stage of the educational process after primary education, an individual will be able to choose between continuing his full-time studies, combining work with studies or embarking on full-time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later on.

Much emphasis has been laid on Distance Learning. With the present development in the restructuring of University systems, and the resuscitation of the Open University, there is every possibility of eliminating the high level of illiteracy in Nigeria.

The contributions of library services to the effective implementation and quality education in the country is the most challenging development that professional librarians would have to face in this era of digital information dissemination.

Dringus and Terrell (1999) described Distance Learning as distinct, pedagogically meaningful and comprehensive on-line learning environment by which learners and faculty can participate in learning and in instructional process at any time and at any place. They further stressed that, Distance Learning manifests a variety of technical tools that support instructional delivery and communication in on-line format. Other component technology tools may include the use of electronic libraries and research data base systems. Also, Kavulya (2004) posits that distance education is practiced all over the world and, in recent years, its scope has developed enormously and rapidly. It has become an intrinsic part of many national education systems and academic discipline.

Distance Education is more than imparting knowledge through on-line structures. It involves all forms of educational curriculum activities just like the conventional campus-based counterparts. Kavulya (2004) also pointed out that, like the other forms of education, the aims of distance education cover a wide spectrum, all of which demand that learners are to be adequately exposed to the existing literature on specific fields of study. He went further to say that the goal of Distance Learning includes the development of personality and cognitive structure through learning guide, problem solving, training of knowledgeable and well-adapted professionals.

Sharing the same opinion with the above statement, Culpepper (1999) postulates that other forms of teaching, such as examination, self-realization, assignment, professional competence, critical thinking, ability to conduct personal, individual, intellectual and independent research must be the goals of Distance Learning. The qualities of imparting knowledge and the abilities to absorb, retain and make use of the knowledge gained must be fully utilized for societal values through Distance Learning.

DISTANCE EDUCATION VIS-À-VIS THE ROLES OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NIGERIA.

The National Library Decree 29 of 1970 that established the National Library of Nigeria gave it the mandate to, among other things:

- (a) assemble, maintain and extend a collection of books, periodicals, pamphlets, newspapers, maps, musical scores, films and recordings etc. considered appropriate for a library of the highest standing;
- (b) establish and maintain a Branch of the National Library of Nigeria in each State of the Federation;
- (c) make the facilities of the National Library of Nigeria available to members of the public and others on proper terms;
- (d) establish and maintain a National Library of Nigeria that will serve as "Giant memory of the Nation, its intellectual storehouse, data bank of learning and remembering processes";
- (e) Provide assistance to interested Organizations that want to establish libraries and to train their staff on how to use the facilities under their control;
- (f) to be responsible for the development of the National Bibliography of Nigeria (NBN) and the National bibliographical services within a National bibliographical center or elsewhere;
- (g) to provide for the nation a source of intellectual support and stimulus for advancement in all fields of human endeavour, particularly in academic, social, cultural, scientific and technological enterprise.
- (h) to provide a comprehensive and rich collection for reference and research materials in all fields of learning within and beyond the nation's physical boundaries.

A careful examination of the above functions shows that they all are virtually associated with the implementation of Distance Education programmes. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) manifesto of 1949 also provides an opportunity and encouragement for children, young people, men and women to educate themselves continually.

The strategies for the implementation of Distance Learning are mostly associated with the fundamental frameworks of collaborations between libraries, learner-support services and the learner-centred environment. The motivation for library services is also based on the dynamic delivery

structures as contained in the programme proper. Dringus and Terrell (1999) gave examples of delivery structures, which include an extensive set of metaphors that visually and conceptually match traditional resources of a physical campus, such as library, study hall, learners discussion hall, orientation room and research laboratory. While Resmer (1998) described the need for Internet architecture for learning in which there must be readily accessible instructional objects that must be easily located, aggregated and customized in learning environment. The delivery of library services to the Distance Education programmes promotes a deeper sense of awareness and participation more than what the mere web pages, e-mail, internet, bulletin boards and group discussion would offer.

To meet up with the above functions of the National Library of Nigeria, as in line with distance leaning programmes, the National Library has made some remarkable progress in the case of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) via digital services to its various clientele. For example corporate networked library services at the Reference and Users Service Department (RUSD - Headquarters) Abuja, is currently hooked on to the internet.

Also, some local Newspapers publications are now on e-Resources that can be viewed on /off-line (Compact DBC). Invariably, the e-Resources can also be viewed in form of Portable Document Format (PDF). There is a digital database on cataloguing and classification of Library materials produced by the National Bibliography of Nigeria (NBN), a division of the National Bibliographic Control Department (NBCD) of the National Library of Nigeria, Lagos. However, (Sonaike, 2005) pointed out that to make possible, browsing and viewing of our local content, basic use of the Greenstone virtual library software with Navigational and intelligent searching and indexing tools are needed.

Again, with an intensive use of E- mail messages, Fax-mail messages, Telephoning (GSM) calls, the services of International Standard Book Number (ISBN) and International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) have been yielding good results since their services have been decentralized. Considering the level of (ICT) facilities that is available and currently in place at the National Library of Nigeria, training of more professional staff (Librarians) can as well be improved upon to further create an enabling environment for more users to have access to adequate information at the appropriate time via the use of digitization.

However, virtual or electronic classroom could be designed to enhance and harness the need for real-time interaction. A Virtual classroom can hold a classroom session with thirty-two (32) learners at a time, no matter where they are located in the world. The National Open University of Nigeria, in collaboration with the National Library of Nigeria, can work together to enforce this kind of digital information technology for Distance Education in Nigeria. With the presence of library services and effective use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the objectives of the Distance Education will be easily achieved.

The establishment of the State Branches of the National Library of Nigeria in some parts of the country will enhance the implementation of Distance Learning in this country if such branches are properly utilized. It is only in Nigeria that the practice of establishing State Branches of the Nation's library all over the federation is in place. Each State Branch of the National Library of Nigeria, in addition to offering services to its clientele in various states where they are located, could as well be used as a learning centre, and each zonal prototype office in the six geo-political zones in the country could be made a zonal coordinating learning centre. Already, the National Library of Nigeria has taken its library services to twenty (20) States out of the thirty-six (36) States in the country with its headquarters at Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory.

One of the major aims of Distance Education is to promote reading culture in the citizenry and to raise the level of literacy in the country. To accomplish this, the National Library of Nigeria, the host-parent Universities offering Distance Learning and the National Universities Commission (NUC) must work hand-in-hand to source for funds to support the full implementation of Distance Education programme in the country. It is not an exaggeration to say that library service delivery is essential to the successful implementation of any higher education programme anywhere in the world.

Daniel (2003) stresses the importance of library services to humanity. He maintains that, while formal education is given more importance than the informal one, the fact remains that the education of an individual starts, in the real sense, after the formal education is over; that education is a life-long process; and, that the libraries are the proper agencies that can provide requisite reading materials for proper education.

Holmberg, (1994) argues that if Distance Education ignores the roles of libraries in the learning process, it will provide a limited experience for the learners. It will not encourage the expected research-led inquiries; neither will it enhance development and challenges of knowledge. Libraries play major roles in the Distance Education courses, because they offer the learners free access to information, self-exposure and personal involvement at all time.

THE CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

The National Library Virtual Library blue print (2001) describes virtual library as a good electronic Wide Area Network (WAN) library system, where the user enjoys the euphoria of being in distant libraries outside his immediate environment without physical movement. Daniel (2003) describes networking through the virtual or digital library as a ready solution to the age-long problem of leapfrogging to draw from the ocean of wealth of the developed economies. A virtual library is a computerized library system, which provides multiple access electronically to the entire collection of a library. Virtual libraries combine the digital technologies with the internet working protocols as infrastructure for searching, collecting, organizing, storing, dissemination of information in various formats, like sound, realia, visual images CD-Rom and CD-Ram for studying, teaching, research and recreation.

However, the challenges of the digital library services in the National Library of Nigeria revolve around the provision of electronic books, e-journals and other research materials to an unlimited number of people anywhere for twenty-four (24) hours running. The National Library of Nigeria should create data bases, where all the operations of library services, such as selection, acquisition, cataloguing/classification, circulation, reference and related services including administration, are networked and packaged digitally for Local Area Network (LAN) and Wide Area Network (WAN) to facilitate electronic accessibility to the distance learners. The virtual library established by the Federal Government through the National Universities Commission (NUC) can be used as a worthy example and, at the same time, a challenge and the way forward for the National Library of Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and other host-parent universities that engage in offering Distance Education programmes need to embrace and embark on library co-operation services and information resource sharing. By working together with the National Library of Nigeria, it will strengthen and foster the successful implementation of Distance Education in the country. All efforts should be channeled towards the fulfillment of basic functions of a library.

With the advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in this 21st century of digital information explosion, it has been aptly argued that the justification for library services is adjudged by the constant and increased use of the library's contents and information access mechanism. The volume of collection in a given library is not a criterion for its significance; rather, the quality of its information dissemination and the type of services it could offer at the appropriate time will be the yardstick for its worthiness. The concerned institutions must come up with strategic logistics and modalities for the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to enhance electronic learning for Distance Education Programme.

The use of e-learning technology should be exploited, and the appropriate library resource materials to facilitate e-learning programme must be put in place. This being the case, the National Library of Nigeria should be adequately funded to accomplish some or all of the objectives.

It is recommended that for a successful implementation of Distance Education in Nigeria, the host universities or institutions offering Distance Learning programme nation-wide should take up the responsibility of identifying, developing, coordinating, providing and assessing the value of the library resources they have, and effectiveness of the library services rendered in their institutions for the skill development of the students of Distance Learning Educators in the society. Considering the fact that an intensive usage of ICT in Library services is subject to changes in the development of digital information dissemination, which in turn results to the fruition of professional enhancement, making ICT to work and to attain its expectations in the National Library of Nigeria, must be seen as a shared responsibility by every stakeholder.

However, whichever way we look at it commitment, dedication,

seriousness of purpose, adequate funding, qualified staff and functional libraries are the determining factors for the success of the Distance Learning programme in Nigeria.

DRAWING THE WAY FORWARD

With the advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in this 21st century of digital information explosion, it has been argued that the justification for library services is adjudged by the constant and increased use of the library's contents and information access mechanism. The volume of collection in a given library is not a criterion for its significance, rather, the quality of its information dissemination and the type of services it could offer at the appropriate time will be the yardstick for its worthiness. The concerned institutions must come up with strategic logics and modalities for the development of information and Communication Technology (ICT) to enhance electronic learning for Distance Education Programme. It is also necessary to review current and new strategies in order to not only enhance the use of e-learning technology but also to exploit and the appropriate library resource materials to facilitate e-learning programme must be put in place. This being the case, the National Library of Nigeria should be adequately funded to accomplish some or all of the objectives. It is recommended that for a successful implementation of Distance Education in Nigeria, the host universities or institutions offering Distance Learning programme nation-wide should take up the responsibility of identifying developing coordinating providing and assessing the value of the library resources they have and effectiveness of the library services rendered in their institutions for the skill development of the students of Distance Learning Educators in the society. Considering the fact that an intensive usage of ICT in library services is subject to changes in the development of digital information dissemination which in turn results to the fruition of professional enhancement making ICT to work and to attain its expectations in the National Library of Nigeria, must be seen as a shared responsibility by every stakeholder.

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