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CONTENTS

	Page
EDITORIAL	
S. O. Popoola, and Samson O. Akande Demographic Variables as Predictors of Library Personnel's Perception of Preservation of Information Resources in Nigerian Federal University Libraries	1
Abayomi E. Adesoye and Oyintola I. Amusa Library Information Technology Usage by Graduate Students of University of Botswana: An Investigation	14
Charles C. E. Obichere and Cajetan Onyeneke Students Use of Internet Services: A Case Study of Evan Enwerem University, Owerri.	29
G. U. Oyedun (Mrs) Information Seeking Behaviour Of Faculty Members Of Federal University of Technology Minna, Nigeria	38
Samuel A. Amkpa and Amudat I. Imam (Mrs) Library Instruction Programmes As Correlates of Students' Catalogue Utilization in Some Nigerian College of Education Libraries	52
Eric T. Ofre and Eucharia U. Okwueze (Mrs) Readers' Attitude to Fee-Based Services in University of Calabar Library	62
Jerome Idiegbeyan-Ose and Theresa U. Akpoghome (Mrs.) Distance Learning In Nigeria and the Role of The Virtual Library	75

Emmanuel Owushi and Isaac Osa-Igbinoba An Appraisal of Fair Dealing Under The Nigerian Copyright Act	86
A.U. Achonna and E. O. Adeyanju Personnel Motivation and Job Performance in Some Selected Academic Libraries In Lagos State, Nigeria	97
S. F. Oketunji (Mrs.) and A. O. Iyoro Effective Workflow for Cataloguing and Handling Problematic Materials in Cataloguing Departments	111
BOOK REVIEW	125
Index to GLJ Volume 12 (2009)	127

DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA AND THE ROLE OF THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses distance learning in Nigeria and the role of the virtual library. Literatures were reviewed from similar studies. The history of distance learning and the impact of technology on higher education were discussed. The paper also looked at the role of libraries in providing a variety of services, resources and technology needed to support this steadily growing facet of the academic institution. It also examined the virtual library as a critical element in distance learning education. The advantages and problems of distance learning programmes and the place of virtual library in solving these problems were also discussed. It was found that virtual library plays an important role in distance learning education and based on these findings, recommendations were made.

INTRODUCTION

At the very beginning of President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration, he declared that education would be the cornerstone of his government. As a result of this declaration, several workshops and seminars were organised in main areas of education. One of such workshops was on distance learning/education and the theme of that workshop was "Towards Evolving a National Policy on Distance Education in Nigeria" held at the ECOWAS Secretariat, Abuja from 27th -29th September 2000.

In line with the intention of the government, the federal government established the National Open University of Nigeria. Various universities also have distance learning programmes in their campuses.

Distance education, because of its rising importance in educational development, needs to be critically evaluated. Students in these programmes are quite few when compared with those that attend

conventional face-to-face university courses. Only two universities (Abuja and Lagos) of the 30 federally owned university offer dedicated distance education courses at degree and sub-professional levels. Others like ABU and Ibadan provide extension and sub-professional courses in education, agriculture and health to meet local demands.

This is a flexible mode of learning which requires different types of pedagogies and services apart from those the university and the university Library traditionally offer. Many of the participants in these distance learning programmes live far away from their host institutions and therefore do not have the same opportunities as students living on campus as regards the use of university libraries as information sources.

Consequently, distance learners demand various services from their local public library as well as from other available institutions that might be found in their neighbourhood. To improve on these, the virtual library comes in handy to substitute and stem down the stress that distance learners go through in search of information for their studies. The relevance of the virtual library in this regard cannot be over emphasised and will be of immense benefit to these students if they are properly guided and tutored on how to assess information online.

WHAT IS DISTANCE LEARNING?

What we know today as distance education has its origin in teaching and learning by correspondence. Correspondence education has been in existence for decades and in an earlier form, even centuries, mainly through adult education. According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia (2003), distance education or learning is a field of education that focuses on pedagogy and andragogy, technology and instructional systems designs that aim to deliver education to students who are not physically on site. Rather than attending courses in person, teachers and students may communicate at periods of their own choosing by exchanging printed or electronic media, or through technology that allows them to communicate in real time and through other ways.

Distance learning, according to Google Glossary, is defined as a form of learning where the instructor and students are in physically separate locations. It is also the process by which technology is used for continuing education in such ways that the participant does not have to be physically present in the place they are being taught. (Capso. Tamu. Edu/glossary.html). It is also a type of education where students work on their own at home or at the office and communicate with faculty and other

students via e-mail, electronic forums, videoconferencing and other forms of computer based communication (www.west.asu.edu/achristie/545/webgloss.htm). It is also a broad term used in describing an instructional situation where teachers and students are physically separated. Historically, this encompassed correspondence courses and other paper-based approaches. Implicit today is electronic transmission perhaps by satellite, cable, terrestrial internet etc. (www.bafsat.com/p4.html).

HISTORY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION/LEARNING

Holmebery (2005) traced the history of distance education as far back as 1728 when an advertisement placed in Boston Gazette by Caleb Phillips, teacher of the new method of shorthand sought students for lessons to be sent weekly. Michael and Greg (2005) opined that modern distance education has been practiced at least since Isaac Pitman taught shorthand in Great Britain via correspondence in the 1840s.

White (1982) noted that the University of London was the first University to offer distance learning at the degree level having established its external degree programme in 1858. In Australia, the University of Queensland established its Department of Correspondence Studies in 1911. Daniel (1996) stated that another pioneering institution was the University of South Africa which has been offering correspondence education courses since 1946. He noted that in New Zealand, university level distance education or extramural studies began in 1960 at Massey University and that the largest distance education university in the United Kingdom is the Open University founded in 1969. In Germany it was the Fern Universitat in Hagen founded in 1974. There are now many similar institutions around the world, often with the name Open University and more than a dozen of them have grown to become mega universities.

Micheal and Greg (2005) stated that Charles Wedemeyer of the University of Wisconsin at Madison is considered the father of modern distance education in America. From 1964-1968, the Carnegie Foundation funded the Wedemeyers Articulated Instructional Media project (AIM) which brought about a variety of communication technologies aimed at providing learning to an off campus population.

Cole International (2001) stated that in Nigeria, all first generation universities were required to attend to the tertiary education needs of the population, especially within their respective catchment areas. Since the Nigerian population was and is still mainly rural and agricultural, extension

courses were established to provide farmers with new skills and to introduce them to new methods. Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) and the University of Ibadan were early providers of such extension services in the early to mid 1960s. University of Lagos had an urban clientele and their courses were geared towards the attainment of university and professional courses.

Cole International (2001) emphasised that between 1960 and early 1970 at ABU, there was the need to upgrade teachers' qualifications and skills. The Northern part of the country was lagging far behind the rest of Nigeria in education. This led to the introduction of Teacher In-service Education Programme (TISEP) by ABU's Institute of Education to raise the quantity and quality of teachers in Northern Nigeria. They reported that when in 1974, the then Head of State General Yakubu Gowon announced government's intention to introduce Universal Primary Education by 1976, it was obvious that there was insufficient time to produce the estimated number of teachers to cope with the demands of the programme. Distance education was therefore considered the best means of supplying the required number of teachers.

Between the early 1970s and mid-1980s, distance education gained recognition internationally as a viable strategy for delivering large-scale educational opportunity to the masses. In many developing countries, it was seen as a panacea to the challenge of providing education at affordable costs. In Nigeria, it led to the establishment of the National Teachers Institute (NTI) and later the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).

According to COL International (2001), the NTI being the first distance learning institution to be established by the Federal Government, was mandated to provide distance education courses designed to upgrade under-qualified and unqualified teachers. NTI also introduced NCE by distance learning in 1990. There was also an attempt by the Shehu Shagari administration to establish an Open University which was to be based in Abuja but the scheme was scrapped by the military regime of General Buhari. At present, current examples of dedicated distance learning institutions in Nigeria are the National Teachers Institute (NTI) and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).

Bizhan Nasseh (1997) noted that it is worthy of note that Britain's Open University brought a new vision of independence for distance education as distinct from traditional education. Zigerell (1984) wrote that Britain's

Open University played a major role in the development of much of the important research in distance learning. He noted that Britain's Open University is the largest and most innovative educational organisation in the world as it is a leader in large scale application of technology to facilitate distance learning. Bizhan Nasseh (2008) noted that the Open University brought the needed respect and confidence to correspondence programmes around the world and that the success of Britain's Open University was the major reason for the development of open universities in other countries.

CONCEPT OF DIGITAL/VIRTUAL LIBRARY

Daniel (2002) stated that the digital library is also called virtual library because in a good electronic wide area networked library, the user enjoys the euphoria of being in distance libraries and yet he has not physically moved. The main feature is the emphasis of access over ownership of the library collections.

Candela (2007) stated that virtual libraries represent the meeting point of many disciplines and fields, including data management, information retrieval, document management, information systems, the web, image processing, and artificial intelligence. He stressed that its multi-disciplinary nature has led to a variety of definitions as to what a virtual library is as each one is influenced by the perspective of the primary discipline of their proposal. He defined virtual library as a tool at the centre of intellectual activity having no logical, conceptual, physical, temporal or personal borders or barriers to information.

According to Wikipedia the free encyclopaedia (2007) a digital library can be built around specific repository software, examples of this include Dspace, Eprint, Fedora, Dlibra and Green Stone Digital Library Software. Many academic Libraries are actively involved in building institutional repositories of their institution's books, papers, theses and other works which can be digitized and made available to the general public with few restrictions.

Martin (1992) stated that the term digital library can be referred to as a concept of information housed electronically and deliverable without regards to its location or time. Mishelia (2004) viewed virtual library as the panacea for dynamic and effective information handling.

ROLE OF VIRTUAL LIBRARY IN DISTANCE LEARNING

According to Alemika (2006), most universities are establishing virtual

libraries and repositories and installing software that would enable their students have access to a more modern and up-to-date information on all subject areas. For the virtual library to be effective to the target audience, the materials and resources to serve the need of the audience must be identified.

Every student, faculty member, administrator, staff member, or any other member of an institution of higher education is entitled to use library services and resources. The American Library Association ALA (2003) stated that the access entitlement principle applies equally to individuals on the main campus, off campus, in distance learning or regional campus programs, or in the absence of any physical campus. They noted that the non-traditional study have rapidly become a major element in higher education and the expanding diversity of educational opportunity. In a growing number of unique environments where educational opportunities are offered, greater recognition of the need for library resources and services at locations other than main campuses, growing concern and demand for equitable services for all students in higher education no matter where the classrooms may be, a greater demand for library resources and services by faculty and staff at distance learning sites and the expansion and advancement in technological innovations in the transmission of information and the delivery of courses are required. To these may be added the appearance and rapid development of the virtual or all electronic university, having no physical campus of its own. ALA (2003) stressed that online access to library resources will blur the distinction between main campus online users of library resources and distance learners.

Distance learning on-line users differ primarily because of variations in their degree of isolation from the originating institutions and their libraries. Although some institutions have their own virtual libraries, many have found it necessary to compensate for their lack of library facilities by contracting with libraries in academically respected physical campuses in order to provide their own students adequate library services and materials. A librarian from the distance learning site will be positioned at the physical library to coordinate the provision of materials and services to the virtual university students. A combination of physical and virtual libraries may also be used in order to adequately serve the needs of the distant learners.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia (2003) noted that in Ontario, Canada the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities established a network

to provide access to students in small and rural communities across Ontario who wanted to pursue college or university courses from their community by distance learning.

The virtual library has a lot of advantages and they include the following:

- i. No physical boundary;
- ii. Round the clock availability;
- iii. Space saving;
- iv. Preservation and conservation of materials;
- v. Ease of information retrieval;
- vi. Multiple Access;
- vii. Added value such as quality of images and enhanced legibility.

Notwithstanding the above itemized advantages, there are certain constraints that affect the use of the virtual library in developing countries. Among these constraints are unreliable power supply; technical know-how; high import tariffs on hardware and software and spares; high installation, maintenance and processing costs, etc. Ojo Igbino (1995).

To enjoy uninterrupted access to the virtual library, payments need to be made for access and downloading of documents electronically. There is also the issue of connectivity costs and who bears this cost? Is it the distance learners and their teachers who are the end users or the institutions or the government. This is against the backdrop that students whether on campus or on distance learning programmes are already used to library systems that are largely free.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Advantages

Distance learning have the following advantages:

- i. It does not require commuting and so saves money for the student;
- ii. Courses could be completed at the student's convenience as most of the classes are asynchronous, which means you do not have to attend a lecture at a particular time and place. You can review the assignments and do your home work during off-hours or from home
- iii. The student can live anywhere, study from anywhere while pursuing the education of his choice. Wherever there is access to a computer and internet connection, studies can be carried out.

- iv. Other advantages are gaining of extra knowledge: self paced learning; physical accessibility; retention of job without necessarily compromising work for class or vice versa; and it also affords privacy.

Disadvantages

The disadvantages of virtual distance learning include the cost of the complex technology deployed: hidden costs, absence of immediate feedbacks; and failure to offer all necessary courses online.

It should be noted that students pursuing a specific certificate or degree programme may not have all the necessary courses available through distance learning, so it is not suited for all subjects. While one can take a degree programme in history online, courses such as nursing clinical cannot be taken online. Thus physical classroom attendance will be mandatory to complete the course.

Distance learning may not be acknowledged by all employers. Although most employers do acknowledge distance learning, certain employers do not. Students who want to work for a specific employer upon graduation should be sure of that employer's perception of distance education.

Distance learning does not give students the opportunity to work on their oral communication skills. There is also the issue of social isolation as most often, studying is carried out alone. Consequently, distance learners may feel isolated or miss the social physical interactions that come with attending a traditional classroom. It should, however be noted that this situation is now being lessened by the advent the use of new communication technologies such as bulletin boards, threaded discussions, chats, e-mails and video conferencing.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that the role of virtual libraries in distance learning cannot be overemphasized. It is on this note that the following recommendations are made:

- i. For effective distance learning activities, an institution should ensure the provision of and ready access to adequate library/learning resources and services to support the courses, programmes and degrees being offered.
- ii. Institutions offering distance learning should have their own library/learning resource centres that will provide

- access to electronic information and make same available to their students through existing technologies, or provide them through normal agreements signed with institutions that own such facilities.
- iii. Such institutions should assign responsibility for provision of library/learning resources and services to this group of students and ensure continued access to them at each site.
 - iv. Long term solution to providing access to distance learners should rely more on authentication of the individual learner rather than his/her location. Proxy servers and browsers certificate could be used to facilitate individual authentication.
 - v. There are legal considerations in dealing with distance learning programmes. In an effort to meet the needs of distance learners, the library must strive for consistent and full access in vendor contracts.
 - vi. Copyright is especially a tough issue, and what constitutes infringement of copyright and fair use regarding electronic storage and transmission of print or image document is yet to be defined by the courts, but libraries can apply to the publishers to store the information in books in electronic format. Institutions should appoint a distance learning team composed of at least one member from the Acquisitions, Reference and ICT units and develop a library wide policy regarding support for distance learners. Stronger relationship with ICT experts need to be developed so that library computing needs are adequately supported.
 - vii. Finally, institutions involved in distance education should increase the development of web-based training materials and their infrastructures and update them on a regular basis.

In conclusion, distance learning will be enhanced by the establishment of virtual libraries by various institutions running these programmes. It may be an expensive undertaking, but it is worth the effort because the world has become a global village where illiteracy must be reduced to the barest minimum if not totally eliminated. This applies to Nigeria in particular if the nation is to achieve its 20-2020 goal. Since education is a right and not a privilege, distance learning must be encouraged so as to give educational opportunities to citizens who are not in a position to benefit

from formal classroom education.

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