

Challenges in the Provision of Library Services for Distance Education: A Case Study of Selected Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

With the increasing popularity of distance education, focus has turned to the role of libraries in the distance learning process. It is widely agreed that like their campus-based counterparts, distance education learners need adequate library services if they are to gain quality education. This paper examines the efforts being made by Kenyan university libraries to fulfil the information needs of the distance education students in their respective institutions. It concludes that although efforts have been made, there is room for improvement through adequate planning, financing and especially through collaboration between information personnel and those who design and implement such distance education programmes.

Introduction

Distance education is practised 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 an academic discipline in its own right. Ten years ago, distance education was dominated by correspondence courses, but today, institutions at all levels are providing instruction to remote and local users through the use of audio, video and Internet technologies (Lorenzen, 1998). With the increasing popularity of distance education, a lot of attention worldwide is being focused on the role of libraries in supporting distance-learners away from the campus. Questions are also being asked on whether libraries have a role in distance education at all (Lombardi, 2000). A review of existing literature has tended to turn up dim prospects. For example, according to Beagle (2000), a review he conducted of articles on the topic of distance education written by

faculty revealed that only a few issues relating to library access or library resource integration were mentioned. Roccas (2001), searching several databases, arrived at a rather pessimistic conclusion that there is almost no reference to library resources in studies about distance education. She also noted that libraries were rarely mentioned in distance education courses and literature, other than references to online catalogues and electronic resources. At the same time, like 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 existing literature on the specific field of study. These goals include the development of personality and cognitive structure through guided learning and problem solving, as well as training of knowledgeable and well-adapted professionals. Thus, distance education aims at more than merely conveying information or imparting knowledge. According to Culpepper (1999), like other forms of teaching, distance learning should facilitate learning goals, such as examination, self-realisation, or professional competence. Critical to the achievement of these goals is the need to promote productive critical thinking and the ability to conduct independent research among the students. This key element of higher education learning cannot be achieved if adequate literature resources are not provided.

Providing Library Services for Distance Education

Distance learning courses have been broadly categorised into two forms: the 'self-contained course', whereby students study from pre-packaged materials and are not expected to read or consult sources beyond the supplied material, and the 'expandable package' where study is done using packaged materials but wider reading is recommended for certain sections of the course. Stephens and Unwin (1997) have justified pre-packaged materials on grounds of equity, whereby some students may not have access to extensive library resources, and secondly, on grounds that the academics for practical reasons have to set the boundaries of study by choosing the necessary sources. However, such arguments can be questioned on the grounds that they do not fully address the aspirations of the learners, and one of the goals of university education, which is equipping individuals with the ability to conduct research independently.

Stephens and Unwin (1997) have also commented on ambivalent attitudes to the relationship existing between library services and distance education. They reported the

argument that although the main motivation for academics to embrace distance learning is the power of market forces, advances in educational technology is also an important contributing factor and, indeed, for both students and course providers, pragmatism outweighs pedagogic principles. However, in another research carried out in England, it was observed that there was a mismatch of expectations between students and course providers about the role of libraries in relation to courses delivered in distance learning mode (Unwin et.al., 1997). According to this research, although some course providers regard the issue of library services as irrelevant to their students, the students themselves felt the need to supplement the provided course materials with additional reading. Therefore, in spite of strong work or career-related motives, students do not wish their studies to be confined within a prescriptive framework.

It has been argued that an approach to distance education that ignores the role of libraries in the learning process in the first place provides a narrow experience for the learners and fails to encourage the expected research-led inquiry as well as the development and challenging of knowledge (Holmberg, 1994). Secondly, such an approach is against one of the fundamental aims of university education of equipping students with vital skills of independent thinking, since it reduces universities to mere designers of pre-packaged, pre-programmed learning. Therefore, unless libraries are encouraged to play a central role in the learning process, and supported in the effort, distance learners face a future in which their experiences as learners are tightly controlled. This underlines the need to find a balance between a market-driven approach and a commitment to the development of students who can operate as independent thinkers and researchers.

The justification for library services for distance education is that access to adequate library services and resources is essential for the attainment of superior academic skills in post-secondary education, regardless of where students, faculty or programmes are located. Like it is the case for regular campus-bound programmes, libraries are charged with providing distance education learners with user-based library services and information assistance that are required for successful completion of coursework, research papers and projects, and independent reading and research. Distance learning students require access to the full range of library services, such as lending services, reference assistance, interlibrary loan, course reserves, and Internet-based resources (Heller-Ross, 1999). Besides, library research and information literacy are essential components of the academic learning experience since the aim of instilling lifelong learning skills through general bibliographic and information literacy instruction in academic libraries is a primary outcome for the distance learning community as it is for those in traditional campuses (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000).

The challenges of providing library services for distance learning revolve around the fact that until very recently most library collections as well as services were designed for on-campus programmes and were not well suited for the needs of distance learning students. Therefore, in the first place, the very characteristic of distant locations of students demands fresh ways to deliver services, based on constantly evolving technologies, new programme offerings, increasing enrolments and learner needs (Swaine, 1998). Secondly, in most cases traditional on-campus library services themselves cannot be stretched to meet the library needs of distance students and faculty who face distinct and different challenges in library access and information delivery. A case in point is Kenya where existing main library resources are generally poor in quality, are situated in major towns and therefore of limited use to the rural based students (Odini, 2000). In the face of this, the host institutions' libraries have the primary responsibility for identifying, developing, co-ordinating, providing and assessing the value and effectiveness of library resources and services designed to meet both the standard and the unique informational and skills development needs of the distance learning community.

In the first place, the provision of library services for distance education needs an infrastructure that integrates distance education services within the library. Secondly, there is need for the reassessment of library funding with the aim of identifying, tracking and understanding the cost factors involved, reallocating funds and using additional funding avenues besides the regular budget processes (Lessin, 1991). Thirdly, there is need to further assess the existing library support for distance learning, its availability, appropriateness and effectiveness, and develop methodologies and policies for the provision of library materials and services from the library to distance learning community designed to ensure an equitable service to the off-campus population (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000).

Another key issue in developing library services for distance education is putting in place human resources to manage and coordinate these services. These include appropriately trained personnel such as a library coordinator to manage the services, subject specialists, additional professional staff in the institution, as well as support staff from a variety of departments, who all work together to provide these services. This implies that staff resources need to be reallocated and staff trained for new responsibilities, while issues such as extending library services to distant places even across national borders will be considered (Heller-Ross, 1999).

Perhaps the most challenging issue is how to ensure that the library services offered to the distance learning community are designed to effectively meet a wide range of informational, bibliographic and user needs. There is a need for reliable, rapid and secure access to institutional and other data banks including print and Internet-based resources. Also, there is a need for consultancy services and programmes of library user instruction designed to instil independent and effective information literacy skills (Caspers et.al., 2001). The distance library loan system is useful as it connects the library services and distance education students. Therefore, it has to be worked out well together with an efficient document delivery. The delivery of documents should be prompt and information personnel should carry out promotion of library services to distance learning community, including documented and updated policies, regulations, and procedures for systematic development and management of informational resources. This means that not only is there an increase in workload but also in electronic environment, training staff in new technologies, putting materials on the web and handling electronic request become necessary (Beagle, 2000).

Finally, providing information literacy instruction to distance education students on library use requires new methods of delivery such as the use of videos, interactive web-based tools and even video conferencing. This calls for investments in information technology and a close working relationship with others, such as IT persons for technical solutions. There is also the need for preparing documentation for electronic tools, and sometimes re-writing it to make sure that it is specific to distance education students' needs. Indeed, according to Ruess and West (1994), the greatest challenge is establishing a working electronic information system that, among others, takes account of the need for technical skills and restricted access among the students.

An Overview of Distance Education in Kenya

The development of distance learning in Kenya has been seen as an attempt to resolve the conflict between the aspirations for more education by an ever-increasing number of Kenyans and the resource constraints (both financial and human) on quantitative growth in enrolments in conventional higher education institutions (Makau, 1993). Consequently, distance learning in Kenya has the objectives of, firstly, providing opportunities to qualified Kenyans who cannot secure places in the existing internal faculties of national universities, and secondly, providing an alternative and innovative method of learning, which is not limited to a particular time and spacing and giving an opportunity for people

to learn at their own pace. Thirdly, it aims at maximising the use of limited educational resources, both human and material, by making university education available beyond the lecture halls (Republic of Kenya, 1981).

Distance learning in Kenya started with the admission of 594 students to the University of Nairobi in 1985. Up till now, this programme is based on a correspondence system and few contact hours when the lecturers visit the regional centres. Self-instructional materials in print, video and audiocassettes have been used as learning resources. Today, this method is also employed in a number of other universities such as Kenyatta University. In some cases, such as in Kenyatta University, it has taken the form of collaboration between individual universities and selected tertiary colleges. The tertiary colleges (centres) provide the physical facilities while the universities provide teachers and syllabi. At specified periods, students go to the centres for formal lectures and examinations. In 2001, Kenyatta University launched a school of distance learning to offer courses on management, education, nutrition and nursing, computing and information technology, banking and finance, and library and information science. In the sciences (computing, nursing, engineering and technology), arrangements are made to enable students to undertake practical sessions at selected study centres.

Lately, there has been a trend toward electronic learning. In 1995, the World Bank initiated the setting up of the African Virtual University, a satellite-based distance education institution whose objectives are to deliver to countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, university education in the disciplines of science and engineering, non-credit/ continuing education programmes and remedial instruction. The need for this initiative was the awareness that higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa suffers a severe crisis that manifests itself through inadequate inputs, declining staff to student ratios, low level of research and low internal and external efficiency. Currently, European and American faculty teach mainly courses which are beamed to 22 universities in Africa. In future the World Bank hopes to broaden the curricula to include African-based programmes. Two Kenyan institutions, namely Kenyatta University and Egerton University are participants in African Virtual University programmes. United States International University-Africa (USIU-A) has also introduced e-learning in areas such as accounting, marketing, and information technology. In the case of e-learning, delivery methods include video-taped lectures augmented with live video lectures, web-based course notes, textbooks, CD-ROMs, and interactive sessions using Internet delivery systems.

The preceding overview provides a framework for the present study. The objective of this study was to investigate the methods used by university libraries in Kenya to provide library services to distance learners enrolled in their parent institutions. The study also aimed to highlight some of the challenges faced by participants in the programme.

Methodology

This paper is based on a case study carried out between March and May 2002 to assess in a general way the status of library services for distance education in Kenya. There are many post-secondary institutions with distance learning programmes in Kenya. But only four universities had distance learning programmes, hence they are used for this study. These are the United States International University-Africa, University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University and the newly established African Virtual University based in Nairobi. Data for this study were collected through interviews with the chief librarian of each of the four universities. In the case of the African Virtual University, data were collected through a review of the available documents and an interview with the chief librarian of one of its partner institutions in Kenya, Kenyatta University.

The study relied on qualitative data collected through interviews based on an interview. Key questions were: (i) How would you assess the role of library services in the effectiveness of distance education programmes in Kenyan universities? (ii) Does your institution engage in any of the following methods in providing library services to distance learning community? (a) special collection dedicated to distance education learners, (b) Internet-based information resources, (c) postal lending, and (d) other techniques. (iii) How would you assess the effectiveness of the methods your institution applies in providing library services to distance learners? (iv) what are the main challenges faced by your institution in providing library services to the distance learning community? The data gathered from different institutions were analysed, and areas of uniformity and differences are discussed.

Findings

The Role of Libraries in Distance Education in Kenya

There is a dearth of literature on the subject of library services for distance learning in Kenya; and among both scholars and librarians, the subject has not been given much of attention. However, there is a recognition that adequate supply of library and information

services to distance learners is critical for the success of the distance learning programmes. Interviews with the chief librarians of the universities included in this study indicate strong appreciation of the role of library services in providing effective distance education in Kenya. In the face of the increasing importance of distance education in the country, and a poor library system, there is need to come up with creative ways of providing distant learners with adequate library services that are required for successful completion of coursework, research papers, independent thinking and research.

Methods of Providing Library Services for Distance Education

This study found out that in the first year of the programme in 1985, the Faculty of Education at the University of Nairobi used part of the fees paid for the course to buy essential books and distributed them to students. This approach proved to be expensive and unsustainable and was therefore discontinued. Currently, those students participating in this correspondence-based distance learning are expected to borrow books from libraries (including other public university libraries, the Kenya National Library Services and non-governmental institutions) or individually purchase their own books from booksellers. At Kenyatta University the study established that apart from instructional print materials, students had to visit the university library to access and borrow reading materials or make use of other relevant libraries in their locality. Apart from the printed materials, the United States International University-Africa Library subscribed to electronic databases with a total of 6000 electronic journals with full text articles. Therefore, students can access the local library as well as Internet resources.

This study also established that African Virtual University (AVU) has made more progress in providing library services for distance learning than other universities. It has created a digital library consisting of e-journals, e-books and online archives to facilitate access to worldwide resources by students. The AVU virtual catalogue is a searchable database that covers a wide variety of topics and contains about 3855 entries, which provides links to information on the Internet. All searchable items have been indexed into browsable web pages by author, subject, titles and series. The online journal service, named *ProQuest* thus provides access to over 1,100 journal and magazine abstracts and full text articles going back 10 years or more. The *ProQuest* is made available through *Howell Information and Learning Inc* and all students obtain user identification. There are also links to the World Bank web page as well as to the web of other international organisations. These Internet-based resources are meant to supplement library resources currently available at partner institutions.

Evaluating the Library Services Provision for Distance Learning

This survey found that a variety of techniques have been employed in Kenyan universities to provide library services to distance learning community. These include the provision of access to campus print collections and electronic resources such as CD-ROMs and Internet-based resources. There is also an effort (as in the case of United States International University-Africa and the African Virtual University) to provide electronic journal access from remote locations through user identification arrangement. However, in general terms, these methods are not effective due to a number of factors. According to the librarians, the most critical problem facing library services for distance education is the lack of institutional policies to guide the provision of information for this category of learners. They observed that while there is agreement among faculty members in distance learning programmes that access to adequate library resources is essential for attainment of superior academic skills, there exists an ambivalent attitude among the planners of these programmes towards the role of these services to the distance learning community. This has hindered the creation of viable policies to guide library personnel in designing services for distance learning. In the absence of policy and clear commitment by institutions concerned, it has not been possible to arrange for optimal funding, planning and implementation programmes for the provision of library services for distance learning.

It is also observed that inadequate funding experienced by public universities and its accompanying effects of poor facilities, equipment and resources is a major hindrance towards the provision of access and timely library services for distance learners. At present some libraries in host institutions, especially public universities, are facing unprecedented decline in funding from their parent organisations. (Republic of Kenya, 1999). This means that they do not have sufficient funds to purchase reading materials, such as journals and monographs, equipment such as computers, and enlist the services of qualified staff even for campus-based regular programmes. Therefore, the libraries from which distance learners are encouraged to borrow information materials are already incapacitated by the lack of financial resources necessary for acquiring a sufficiently large stock of books relevant to the courses. In cases where materials are available for students who live far away, especially rural areas, regular use of the library is inhibited by cost and time involved in visiting the university library, short loan period for books and restricted use of rare books, theses and journals. These prohibitive costs of reading materials could be one of the reasons for the high dropout rate from the courses, which at a time stood at between 15% and 25% (Otiende, 1988). The public libraries are not

adequately stocked. As at the end of 2000 there were 26 operational libraries in Kenya. But the stock could not support university learning (Odini, 2000).

Librarians view the use of virtual services such as Internet technology as a viable alternative to the provision of print-based services which would necessitate physically visiting the library to satisfy specific information needs. However, the prospects of web-based resources are constrained by a number of factors. In the first place, library automation in Kenyan universities has largely focused on functions such as acquisition and cataloguing, circulation and administration. Therefore, the use of Internet technology for information is still in its infancy. Secondly, Internet use has been hampered by high costs and low speed of access due to poor telecommunications infrastructure in the country. So far, Internet services are largely restricted to the main towns where the right telecommunications infrastructure exists. Thus, it is of limited use to distance learners spread throughout the country.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Distance education has continued to gain popularity in Kenya and many post-secondary institutions are creating programmes that target the increasing demand for higher education. While this trend needs to be encouraged, checks and balances need to be put in place to ensure that the quality of the learning process is ensured. Particularly in the university setting, which is the apex of the national education system, the market motive, as well as pragmatic considerations, should not be allowed to override sound pedagogic principles.

From this study, it is evident that although a lot of efforts has been made to satisfy the library and information needs of the distance education students, this has been hampered by several factors. These factors include lack of institutional policies, poor planning of distance education programmes, inadequate physical facilities and professional staff, lack of adequate funding of university libraries and poorly developed Internet infrastructure in the country.

At the same time, there is need for innovative methods that would ensure that the distance learning community in Kenyan universities are not disadvantaged compared to their campus-bound counterparts. There is need to ensure that distance learners also gain adequate library and information experience, which would enhance their critical thinking and enhance their degree of exposure to existing knowledge. These methods should take into consideration the unique setting of Kenyan distance learners, which is characterised

by poor national library network, especially in the rural areas, predominance of print-based courses and also the increasing predominance of e-learning throughout the world.

Critical to this endeavour is the principle that effective learning in the university is a collaborative effort of the curriculum planners, implementers, administrators and those providing the support services such as library services. To ensure that distance learners are well provided with the literature and information they require, there is need for partnership between those who plan and implement these programmes. These include teaching faculty members, directors of distance learning programmes and the library personnel. This partnership should start right at the planning stage, when the logistics for how the literature component would be supplied is established. Also, there is need first to create policies that recognise the need for library services for distance learners and give guidelines on how these would be provided as well as the necessary financial resources, personnel and physical facilities.

University libraries should also come up with information access and delivery mechanisms that favour the peculiar circumstances of distance learners. One particular method is to create a special collection targeting the distance learning community only. This collection should be composed of core texts for each of the courses on offer. It would be advisable to have multiple copies of these texts to ensure access by a large numbers of students. The commonest borrowing period prevalent in Kenyan universities is two weeks for undergraduate students and up to a month for postgraduates. Longer borrowing periods should be allowed for distance learners to avert frequent trips to the university libraries to borrow and renew materials. Photocopying of materials should be encouraged without infringing on the copyright laws. This will ensure that students have access to materials that are not available for out-of-the-library use. Through approved methods, such as vouchers, libraries can facilitate distance borrowing whereby students do not have to personally come to the library. By the use of postal and courier services, requested materials could be delivered to the learners.

The key to the development of library services for distance education in Kenya is the existence of a forward-looking personnel that would create and manage such library services effectively. There is therefore the need for appropriate training and retraining to ensure that the library personnel have the appropriate skills. An example is the skill in web design and electronic publishing in the case of web-based library services. Library schools also need to include courses in their curricula that would focus on techniques of library services for distance learning.

Finally, there is no doubt that the future of distance education lies in the Internet-based techniques of delivery. The Internet can be used to mount reading materials to support each distance education course. Already, a number of universities in Kenya, such as the United States International University-Africa and the African Virtual University, are pioneers in this direction. These methods of delivery will need to be accompanied by web-based delivery mechanisms of the relevant literature. It is important for institutions offering distance learning programmes to invest in Internet facilities not only for distance learning purposes but also because it is a useful tool for management purposes. The bottom line of this endeavour is the need to improve the national telecommunications infrastructure, which is presently restricted to urban areas in Kenya, and is largely expensive and inefficient, especially due to unfavourable government policies.

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