Distance librarianship in Kenyan universities

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Abstract

Rationale of study – Many institutions of higher learning in Kenya are now delivering their programmes through distance learning and the library is providing support by offering information resources and services to students who are off campus. This research sought to establish the effectiveness of libraries in providing information resources and services to open and distance learners (ODLs).

Methodology – The research used a descriptive survey design to analyse the effectiveness of information resource and service provision to ODLs by university libraries in Kenya. Data was collected using interviews and questionnaires from 179 ODLs and 83 librarians in selected universities in Kenya offering ODL programmes. The data collected was edited, organised, analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics.

Findings – The study found that academic libraries were generally effective in delivering services to ODLs. This was exemplified by the existence of institutional repositories where research papers were available to ODLs; the majority of the students were trained on basic computer skills enabling them to use digital resources effectively; as well as collaboration during information repackaging between faculty, ICT staff and ODL personnel.

Implications – This study is of importance to university libraries, librarians, ODLs and administrators in universities in Kenya. The findings can be used to develop policies, programmes and infrastructure in academic libraries in Kenya to enable them to support distance learning effectively.

Originality – This paper highlights the role libraries can play to ODL university students, an aspect that can greatly influence information resource and service delivery. It makes a significant contribution to the distance librarianship practice and policy.

Keywords

Information resources repackaging, open and distance learning, Kenya, distance librarianship

1 Introduction

Distance education is an umbrella term, which includes several, more specific teaching and learning situations. It can be defined as the learning process in which there is a quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the learning process. It is also characterised by the presence of specific learning materials and student support services and the use of different communication media (Keegan, 1990). Distance learning is further perceived as a method of study that is pursued by students who are physically separated from their tutors and institution of instruction for the greater part of their study (Watson, 1992). Juma (2004) explains that distance learning is delivered in Kenya through print-based distance education, institution-based mode of study, mixed mode provision, satellite and web-based distance education.

The rapidly increasing demands for all levels and forms of education, coupled with a limited capacity to expand through traditional means, makes ODL a significant option of expanding access to education. Distance education is the solution to the stringent need for education of those who cannot commit to classical student life. The provision of this mode of education has gained popularity worldwide. For instance, the University of Liverpool offers 41 distance learning courses from a wide area of disciplines

(Financial Times, 2010) while Harvard University offers more than 300 classes in several formats online. Since its introduction in Africa, ODL has enabled several countries to provide relatively affordable forms of access to formal education. Distance education has become an intrinsic part of many educational systems and an academic discipline in its own right (Holmberg, 1995).

In Kenya, both private and public universities have embraced the ODL mode. Most of these universities provide distance learning because their resources have become over-stretched and are unable to cater for the ever-increasing demand for higher education in Kenya through traditional classroom learning (Ndanu, 2014). The number of ODLs has been on the increase since the 1990s. According to the Kenya Economic Survey (2014), the overall university student enrolment increased by 34.9 percent from 240,551 in 2012/13 to 324,560 in 2013/14. The increase is attributable to higher enrolment levels in the public universities following the introduction of new courses in addition to upgrading of university colleges. The then Commission for Higher Education (CHE) (2007), now Commission for University Education (CUE) recommends that a university should provide adequate resources to support ODLs. Kavulya (2004) reiterates that distance learning in Kenya has the objective to provide learning opportunities for qualified Kenyans who cannot

secure places in the existing facilities of national universities; provide an alternative and innovative method of learning which is not limited to a particular time and space; and an opportunity for people to learn at their own pace. It also helps at maximising the use of educational resources in the libraries, both human and material, by making university education available beyond lecture halls. Wanyama (2010) states that courtesy to ODL, students are able to follow lectures, review their grades, and submit school assignments online. Public and private universities in Kenya have increased their investments in ODL in the recent past. For instance, Kenyatta University (KU) re-branded its Open Learning Institute to Digital School of Virtual and Open Learning in 2014. Private universities with ODL programmes include Strathmore University, the United States International University, Daystar University, Kenya Methodist University (KeMU), and Mt. Kenya University, among others.

With the increasing popularity of distance education, focus has now turned to the responsibility of libraries in supporting effective distance learning. The involvement of librarians in all aspects of distance education represents a paradigm shift in the nature of relationships between librarians, faculty, technologists, learning materials producers and other service providers. This is because the provision of library services for distance education has implications on all aspects of library activities including administration, collection management, acquisitions, cataloguing, circulation, reference services, user education as well as the use of information and communication technology (Msuya & Maro, 2002). According to CUE (2014), a university library shall provide varied, authoritative and up-to-date information resources for all academic programmes to support teaching, learning, and research and community service for all categories of its users. Therefore, it is critical for the academic librarian to provide resources and services to all the users regardless of their category – full-time, part-time, ODL. In the same breadth, the universities are also expected to provide adequate resources to support open, distance and e-learning library services (CUE, 2014).

It is the factor of distance that redefines the role of academic libraries in distance education and leads to the notion of distance librarianship (Watson, 1992). Available evidence indicates that ODL students do not easily access library resources which are vital in their education just as it is to their counterparts studying through the regular modes in the universities (UoN, 2010). This implies that ODLs do not get the best service in obtaining the expected support from these libraries. This brings to the fore the

need to design and deploy library services which adequately support ODLs. Distance librarianship is one of the models which academic libraries in Kenya can deploy to enhance their capacity to meet the information and other learning needs of their users.

2 Distance librarianship

Distance librarianship in the provision of library services in support of college, university, or other post-secondary courses and programmes offered away from a main campus, or in the absence of a traditional campus, and regardless of where credit is given. The phrase is inclusive of services to courses in all post-secondary programmes designated as extension, extended, off-campus, extended campus, distance, distributed, open, flexible, franchising, virtual, synchronous, or asynchronous (Discenza, Howard and Schenk, 2002).

The Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) reiterate 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 addition, library support to distance learners is also vital because of curriculum requirements, student and faculty research needs, and general information literacy (ACRL, 2000).

Traditionally, academic librarians provide reference services to students, faculty, and staff on campus; guide patrons to appropriate materials; build library collections to support curriculum objectives of programmes; act as the custodians of archival materials; enhance access to materials through interlibrary loan; and increase information literacy by training students in the effective use of libraries through bibliographic instruction. In all these roles, academic librarians have been fairly passive. They usually wait for the information seekers to come to them for assistance rather than proactively going out to disseminate information.

To fulfil the ACRL requirements, academic libraries must provide equivalent library collections and services to distance learners. Since distance learners cannot come to the library, library resources and services must be delivered to them, electronically or through other means (Thompson, 2002). As Barron (1999) points out, libraries are in the business of helping students get information they want, when they want it, and getting it to them regardless of where they are physically located.

Academic libraries are adopting a two-pronged strategy in response to this challenge. Many academic libraries are creating Web-accessible

virtual or electronic libraries. Most virtual libraries have online public access catalogues (OPACs) to make students aware of their journal and book collections; remote access to electronic databases with citations, abstracts, or full-text of journal articles, books, encyclopaedias, and reference works; interlibrary loan and document delivery services; remote reference assistance via chat, email, or telephone; and Web tutorials for library instruction (Matson and Bonski, 1997). Academic libraries are also increasingly creating positions for distance-education (DE) librarians to cater for the specific needs of distance learners. DE librarians serve as liaisons to three different constituents; the distance learners, faculty who teach distance courses, and programmes and departments that provide support to these courses. These roles are in addition to those suggested by Matson and Bonski (1997) which include proactive enhanced service provider; expert of copyright, or of licensing and electronic redistribution; and system interface designer.

Liebowitz (1997), states that DE librarians are the primary contacts for distance students and proactively ensure that distance students have access to basic library services and resources such as reference assistance, library materials, bibliographic instruction, document delivery, and reserve readings. DE librarians also work as system interface designers and are intimately

involved in developing virtual libraries and specialised materials like online tutorials and Web pages for distant learners. Ideally, DE librarians contact and work closely with faculty teaching distance-learning courses to promote library usage and instruction. They may also serve as technology advisers and assist faculty in incorporating technology into the instructional design of their Web-based courses (Zastrow, 2002). DE librarians can help faculty navigate copyright and fair use issues as they pertain to electronic resources and Web-based courses and assist them in designing assignments that are feasible in the distance-learning environment (Liebowitz, 1997).

DE librarians also serve as links between various support services. They work with continuing education units and colleges or departments delivering distance-learning courses; communicate with information technology and computing units to ensure convenient and reliable access to electronic databases for distance learners; and negotiate reciprocal borrowing contracts with other libraries to facilitate access to materials for distance learners. To fulfil these roles and responsibilities, DE librarians are expected to possess a wide-ranging arsenal of technical skills as well as soft skills such as flexibility, time management as well as the ability to negotiate, collaborate, and communicate with diverse categories of clientele (Kirk and Bartelstein,

1999). Some of the benefits of distance librarianship to ODLs include saving physical space taken by physical library materials; enhancing searching facilities in digital format; providing access to materials regardless of location; providing the user with the capability to download materials – if permission allows; facilitating multiple or concurrent access of information materials; and eliminating the problem of missing or lost information materials. Distance librarianship is also less labour intensive.

3 Rationale of study

The library is the nerve centre of any educational institution as it promotes reading, inquiry and independent thinking through the provision of resources to support teaching and learning activities (Mabawonku, 2004). Library services are essential support services to distance education students (Caspers, Fritts & Gover, 2001). Cooke (2004) states that the provision of library services to non-regular and remote users can be so involving. He advises that librarians should therefore look out for ways and means of making this task manageable. He further recommends that librarians must create policies and procedures specific to open and distance learning; coordinate programme correspondents such as document delivery and reference services; market their services; continually evaluate the

best information resources; create and maintain websites; and collaborate with faculty, administrators and other librarians in designing and delivering effective services.

Distance learners access library and educational resources and services in various ways (Sacchanand, 2002). Kavulya (2004) in his study of distance education in four universities in Kenya opined that some students have little or no exposure to library use and this affects their access to library resources. This is an indication that libraries are not adequately effective in service delivery to ODLs who are largely dependent on the quality and academic usefulness of services that the library can offer both in print and in electronic form. Members of the ODL community are entitled to library services and resources equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus settings. It is therefore important for university libraries in Kenya to take up the challenge and address the unique needs of ODLs who are unable to access physical library resources and services.

4 Research Objectives

The aim of this study was to establish the effectiveness of libraries in the provision of information resources and services to open and distance learners in universities in Kenya. In this regard, the author explored the distance librarianship model and its likely potential and

effectiveness in enhancing library and information services to ODLs in Kenyan universities. The researcher also investigated factors which influence the effectiveness of distance librarianship in academic settings. These included the ICTs available in providing information resources and services to ODLs in university libraries; the technical skills of open and distance learners for utilising information resources and services offered by university libraries; examined the ways in which libraries repackage information for open and distance learning students in universities in Kenya; and to investigate on the competencies for distance librarianship in universities in Kenya.

5 Theoretical Framework

A number of theories are used to explain information resource and service provision in academic libraries. For ODL, the equivalency theory model fits best. Equivalency theory states that it should not be necessary for any group of learners to compensate for different, possibly lesser, instructional learning experiences. Students should have learning experiences that are tailored to the environment and situation in which they find themselves (Simonson, 1999). Thus, those developing distance education systems should strive for equivalency in the learning experiences of all students, regardless of how they are linked to the resources, including

library information products and services, or the instruction they require. Equivalency gives responsibility to the distance educator to design learning events that provide experiences with equal value for learners in different learning environments.

The second issue to consider is the concept of learning experience. This is anything that happens to the student to promote learning, including what is observed, felt, heard, or done. It is likely that different students in various locations, learning at different times, may require a different mix of learning experiences. Simonson, Schlosser & Hanson (1999) stated that the goal of instructional planning is to make the sum of experiences for each learner equivalent. Instructional design procedures should attempt to anticipate and provide the collection of experiences that will be most suitable for each student or group of students. For example, if library resources are important to a course or unit, then they should be available. Educational equivalence of the resources of the library should be as readily available to the distant learner as they are to the local learner, whether electronically, through collaborative agreements with local libraries, or through the delivery of library resources to the distant student. Learning experiences suitable to the needs of the individual learner and the learning situation

should be made available and that the availability of learning experiences should be proper and timely.

6 Methodology

This study was conducted as a survey. It targeted librarians who are heads of sections and ODLs at the main campuses of the two universities in Kenya. Postgraduate final-year students in the Department of Library and Information Science from KU were selected to participate in the study because KU is among the leading public universities in Kenya offering information science programmes on ODL mode at postgraduate level. Second year postgraduate students of Agriculture from KeMU were selected to participate in the study because the university had registered a large number of students in the ODL mode in the department compared to others. Besides, this was the only postgraduate programme at the university that is offered purely on ODL model.

Homogeneous purposive sampling was adopted to identify the two programmes offered by the ODL mode in the two universities. This is because it focuses, reduces variation, simplifies analysis, and facilitates group interviews (Patton 1990). The respondents from the two cases share common characteristics facilitated by a similar background or setting. The researcher interviewed the section heads whose contacts were obtained from the

university libraries' records. A sample of 59 respondents out of 179 was chosen. KU had 56 students registered for their second year studies in Library and Information Science while KeMU had 123 Agriculture students registered. Simple random sampling was used to select the first 19 and 40 respondents from the two programmes in the two universities respectively. In both cases a third of the total target population was obtained.

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques were used. Primary data was collected using questionnaires and interviews while secondary data was obtained from relevant books, journals in both print and electronic sources. Survey questionnaires were used to collect data from students while structured interview schedules were used for librarians. Questionnaires were used because they are less expensive and suitable for large groups of respondents. They also facilitate anonymity and may result in more honest responses. Structured interviews were used because they facilitate clarification of questions and have higher response rates than written questionnaires. A total of 59 questionnaires were given out to ODLs in both universities. These were 40 questionnaires to second-year postgraduate students of Library and Information Science and 19 to students of Agriculture at KU and KeMU respectively.

Structured interviews were conducted with 13 out of 14 librarians (heads of sections) in the two selected universities. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics.

7 Research Findings and Discussions

The research findings are presented and discussed as below.

Reasons for choosing to study through open and distance learning mode

The majority (40%) of the respondents stated that ODL was time saving while 24 percent said they were unable to attend regular classes because of other commitments such as employment. 18 percent of the respondents explained that ODL was convenient as they accessed resources from anywhere without requiring to be in the institution physically. The other reasons for choosing ODL given by the respondents include the notion that ODL facilitates a higher retention of learning outcomes (4%); other unspecified personal reasons (4%); and the desire to avoid a traditional class setting (2%). It is evident from these findings that the majority of the students enrol in ODL programmes to save time. The learners are able to complete their courses relatively fast. Furthermore, they are able to attend to their other businesses while still undertaking their studies.

Availability of and access to ICT resources

The majority (62%) of the respondents reported that ICT resources were available in their institutions while 24 percent said ICT resources were very much available. Only a minority (14%) of the respondents felt that ICT resources were not available. The results show that both KeMU and KU libraries have established ICT infrastructure which provides adequate support to ODLs in terms of facilitating access to and use of information resources and services. This infrastructure has enabled the establishment of library web sites as well as hosting and dissemination of myriad electronic resources. ICT-facilitated services and products were constantly available even when the physical libraries were closed.

The major electronic resources used are: e-books, e-journals, e-past papers, audio visuals, databases and institutional repositories. E-books and e-journals were ranked as the most common at 94 percent; audio-visuals were second at 81 percent; e-past papers followed at 73 percent while institutional repositories had a response rate of 56 percent. These findings indicate that the digital resources available in the academic libraries in Kenya served the essential academic interests of the ODLs. The mention of past papers as one of the favourite information resources is significant and can be explained by the fact that the ODLs ordinarily

prepare for exams off campus and use past papers to gauge their preparedness. It is also noteworthy that each category of the digital resources was used by more than half of the respondents. This indicates that digital resources were popular with the IDLs due to their convenience of use and ready availability.

The majority (58%) of the respondents reported that they accessed the library information resources and services through the Internet. Only a minority (42%) accessed the same resources and services physically by visiting the library. The latter category of respondents used both digital and physical resources but from within library facilities. These findings can be explained by the fact most ODLs spend some periods in the campuses and use physical library resources during these periods.

The results of the study also indicate that the students and librarians interacted online. These interactions were on special information requests (31%); current awareness (31%); selective dissemination of information (14%); and book renewals (8%).

Skills for utilising information resources and services

The majority (66%) of the respondents reported that they were trained by the university on how best to use the digital resources while a minority (34%) said they were not. Those

trained reported that they gained essential ICT skills from the programmes. Therefore, the majority of the students had the basic ICT skills to make the best use of the digital library services and resources. This shows that the universities have made efforts to support ODLs to effectively access and use digital information resources and services. Of those who got training from the university, the majority (28%) were trained by library staff; 26 percent by ICT staff; while 12 percent were trained by the ODL department. It is evident that academic libraries in Kenya administer basic computer training to enhance the capacity of the students to access and use information resources effectively.

The majority (76%) of the respondents also reported that the ICT training was offered to them in the first week after registration. Nonetheless, 12 percent said they received the training after two weeks while 6 percent said they received it in the middle of the semester as another 6 percent stated they received it at the end of the semester. These findings indicate that although basic ICT training was offered for different groups users at different times of the semester, it empowered the students to work on their own with the ICT tools used in their libraries. However, the researcher points out that basic ICT training for library users should be offered at the beginning of the semester. This timing is important because it would

empower them to work with the ICT-based information retrieval systems right from the beginning of their course. Students who receive the training in the middle or at the end of the semester are disadvantaged because they begin to use the library systems without the requisite skills. The majority of the respondents were happy with the quality of the basic ICT training they received. Nearly one third of the respondents said it was good (32%) as 14 percent said it was very good while 12 percent said it was excellent. Thus more than half (58%) of the respondents were generally happy with the training. These results indicate that the respondents generally benefited from the training and were able to work better with the ICT-based library systems after the training.

From the interviews, the researcher found out that the majority (69%) of the librarians administered information literacy training to the students while 31 percent did not. Those who said they did not conduct information literacy classes explained that the fundamental elements of information literacy were integrated into the basic ICT training modules. These findings point to a divergent view on whether information literacy should be offered on its own or integrated into the other library training programmes. The researcher is of the view that whereas the other library programmes contribute to building the information competencies of the library users,

the allocated time and timing may not be appropriate for information literacy. The researcher, therefore, proposes that information literacy classes should be offered independently to all the new library users. She further suggests that this training should be offered before any other training. This is because information literacy is the anchor on which other trainings and skills of library users rest.

Information repackaging

The study revealed that the majority (54%) of the librarians did not repackage information to suit the unique needs of their users. This implies that information repackaging has not been embraced fully as an important service by these libraries. All the librarians concurred that repackaging information enhances its potential to meet the specific needs of the users and promotes the usage of the information materials. On a scale of 100%, the majority (83%) of the library users reported that repackaging improves the relevance of information indicated while another 50 percent said it saves the time of users. It is, therefore, important for libraries to improve their information repackaging services to enhance their capacity to support ODLs effectively. The researcher further assessed if there was any form of information repackaged in non-book format. Data gathered showed that the majority (56%) of the users had not accessed repackaged

information materials in non-book formats from their libraries. Those who had accessed information in non-book format said these were in the form of CD-ROMs (63%), scanned documents (26%) and audio files (11%). These findings indicate that libraries have centred their information repackaging services on book formats. The researcher suggests that they should expand their focus to include the other emerging document formats. Other specialised services offered by the libraries to the ODLs included SDI (67%) and technical information services (33%). None of the libraries offered any translation services.

The study also found from the librarians that the majority (53%) of them collaborated with others in the development of learning materials for ODLs while the rest said they did not. Those who collaborated pointed out links between them and the ODL directorate, lecturers, among library staff as well as schools and departments. These findings indicate that distance librarians play an important role in the development and dissemination of learning materials to the ODLs.

The findings revealed that the information services offered met the academic needs of the majority (69%) of the respondents. The other needs the users felt the information services met included research (22%), social (6%) and technical (3%) needs.

On the source of data modules, the majority (55%) of the respondents said they obtained the modules from the ODL institute, 33 percent from the departments and 12 percent from the library. The library is ranked last in providing study modules to ODLs. Although libraries are listed last as a source of data modules for ODLs, this role is likely to grow if librarians would enhance their distance librarianship skills and fully take their responsibilities.

8 Conclusion and recommendations

Distance librarians stand at the crossroads of opportunities, challenges and responsibilities. Their role in ensuring the effective delivery of distance learning programmes is now needed more than ever. They bear the responsibility of providing information services to ODLs which are equivalent to those offered to regular students on campus. To deliver this mandate distance librarians have to position themselves strategically in the information value chain. Furthermore, they must develop appropriate skills and adopt the right attitudes.

In terms of ICTs available in meeting the information needs of ODLs in universities in Kenya, it was found out that libraries have adequate infrastructure in place to support the ODL programmes at their universities. Therefore, the facilities should be used optimally to support remote access to library information resources and services by ODLs.

However, inadequate skills for utilising information resources and services at the university libraries in Kenya were a notable challenge. It was also observed the libraries do not offer consistent training to all students. Therefore, university libraries need to adopt a semester calendar to offer adequate information literacy training to the ODLs.

Distance librarians need to become more visible to ODLs as well as to the faculty to help students to overcome their apprehension of circumstances that require the use of library resources. Therefore, it is imperative for librarians to become good at educating and lobbying faculty and administrators, and marketing their services to all groups concerned. Library orientation, library manuals (print and online), personalised reference services, and computer-oriented training programmes and library skills courses need to be made practical and fully implemented. Similarly, librarians need to repackage information resources and services in various ways and formats to enhance their suitability for use and dissemination.

9 Implications of the findings of the study

The findings of this study can be used by universities offering ODL programmes to develop policies that mainstream library services in the design and delivery of the services. Similarly, the findings can be used by

institutions which train librarians to develop curricula which adequately impart the skills essential for distance librarianship in Kenya.

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