

Meeting the Information Needs of Remote Library Users: The Case of University of Maiduguri Distance Learning Programme

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Abstract

Many higher educational institutions now offer distance academic programmes through the Internet and the World Wide Web, to cater for the needs of growing numbers of distance education students. Before an academic library can adequately address the needs, preferences, and expectations of its remote patrons, however, it needs to understand the peculiarities and challenges of serving patrons at a distance. The Distance Learning Unit of the University of Maiduguri is one of the leading distance education institutions in Nigeria, and its library is among those actively engaged in ascertaining the needs of remote library users and developing services and resources to meet these needs. A portrait of library resources and services available to distance learning students is presented, and results of a survey conducted to assess the distance learning students' perceptions, expectations and use of library resources are reported. A key finding is that students are pleased with the quality and availability of library services, but not full partakers of the vast array of services and collections.

Keywords: information needs, distance learning, remote library users, distance education

Introduction

The higher education sector in Nigeria, particularly university education, is experiencing an unprecedented growth. Currently, with over 100 universities (public and private) yet, a large number of prospective candidates cannot be absorbed in the regular system but have to be catered for by the National Open University and the distance learning programmes of several Universities in and out of Nigeria. This trend is largely a result of new enabling technologies that have facilitated the virtual delivery of academic programmes. This has in turn led to globalization of academic programmes; emergence of virtual academic communities; and Libraries becoming key success factors in the virtual academic environment.

University of Maiduguri's involvement in distance education dates back to 2003 when the then Vice Chancellor Professor J.D. Amin constituted the Committee on Distance Learning chaired by Professor Nur Alkali. The report was approved by the Senate in 2004 making the university a dual mode institution by providing academic services to both conventional and distance learners. The Centre went operational in the 2005/2006 academic session with a total of ten departments taking part in the programme. Currently, fifteen departments were involved with a total student's population of over 4000 under the programme.

Mounting of new programmes such as this, result in upsurge of student's population, which calls for new and better library resources and services to cater for this special category of users. Ramat Library of the University of Maiduguri has over the years improved the quality of its resources as well as introduced new services with a view to meeting the needs of its clients especially, those remote users. However, the question is whether these remote library users are satisfied with the resources and range of services provided?

Statement of the Problem

Distance education programmes are now standard in most colleges and universities worldwide. Academic libraries have begun to build services and programmes for remote users. Yet as libraries develop new services for their remote users, little notice is paid to whether or not the initiatives are useful, successful, or whether targeted users are even aware of their availability. Additionally, although the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services (ACRL, 2000) state 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", some institutions have not ensured that they are fully

serving remote students. Two paramount issues of importance exist for academic libraries serving students at a distance: first, are the services and collections provided to remote students equivalent to those offered to on-campus users and, second, which services and resources are most used and/or most needed by remote users and why?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to ascertain the:

- a) Perceptions, expectations and use of Ramat Libraries' resources and support services by Distance learning students of the University of Maiduguri.
- b) Extent to which the Distance learning students' information needs were met by the Ramat Library.
- c) Information-seeking behaviour patterns of Distance learning students of the University of Maiduguri.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- a) What are the perceptions, expectations and use of Ramat Libraries' resources and support services by Distance learning students of the University of Maiduguri?
- b) To what extent does the Ramat Library meet the information needs of Distance learning students of the University of Maiduguri?
- c) What is the information-seeking behaviour pattern of Distance learning students of the University of Maiduguri?

Literature review

Much of the literatures on distance education do not address the issue of library services to distance learners. As Carty (1991) outlines, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that library services for distance education students began to take on a higher profile, leading to an increase of literature addressing surrounding issues. Earlier literature on library services to distance education students focused on issues of quality and accreditation of distance education programmes in higher education (Simmons, 1991; Council for Adult and Experimental Learning, 1993; Kaina, 1991). These papers reflected the essence of discussions about the library as a catalyst in improving the quality of distance education programmes. In more recent years, with the proliferation of distance education programmes resulting from employment of new and more advanced technologies that facilitate virtual delivery of course content globally, the focus of the literature is now increasingly on resources and services to support the emerging virtual academic communities. The ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services (ACRL, 2000) has become a yardstick for developing/assessing library services for remote users. The guidelines stress the importance of equal library services to both remote students and traditional campus students. They also advise librarians to regularly survey distance learning library users to monitor and assess both the appropriateness of their use of services and resources and the degree to which needs are being met.

Other professionals have expressed the need for the library to be visible and active within the virtual academic environment. Lebowitz (1997) laments that:

“... there seems to be little or no correlation between how innovatively an institution delivers distance courses and the way in which it provides library services to distance students ... Although many consider the library to be

the heart of the university, the use of the library is often not incorporated into courses being prepared for distance delivery.”

She recommends that librarians convince fellow educators and administrators that as they are expanding their institutions’ educational programmes beyond the campus boundaries, they need to provide their students with access to library services, which include among others, instruction in use of resources, document delivery, and communication facility between the students and librarian. Lebowitz also outlines three models of providing library service to off-campus students:

1. A department or unit dedicated to providing services staffed by a librarian coordinator to ensure that students have access to library resources and services;
2. Integrated or decentralized services where there is no dedicated unit or coordinator and students direct their requests to the same service units as on-campus students;
3. A branch campus structure where a branch library provides resources to students who are away from the main campus.

Thompson (2002), expressing similar sentiments to those of Lebowitz, states that “... while many campuses have defined initial approaches to offering courses, few, if any have defined accessible and viable strategy for making information resources available to these distance learners.” She argues that, meeting the information needs of students in an electronic environment represents the greatest obstacle to creating a complex and comprehensive set of distributed learning offerings. Thompson, discussing findings of ACRL’s Academic Library Trends and Statistics survey of the year 2000, reports an increase in the number of students participating in distance education programmes. Most of the responding libraries (90 percent) offer services to remote students as part of the main library, rather than administering them as a

separate unit. The libraries are using a mix of newer technology and more traditional methods of delivery of reference services, instruction and documents delivery.

Cooper and Dempsey (1998) discussed issues surrounding remote users in an academic environment. Their approach is that of focusing on who is using electronic information resources, how they do so, and what are their needs and expectations. They suggest that there should be a differentiation between the remote user who is a few buildings away, and the remote user participating in a distance learning curriculum involving a distance of hundreds or thousands of miles. They argue that on-campus remote users are likely to possess significant experience with library research and familiarity with electronic resources, while their distant education counterparts, who are typically older and unfamiliar with electronic resources, require more instruction in the use of electronic resources. Cooper and Dempsey suggest that a paramount factor of remote access is the quality of the services associated with a particular electronic resource or service. Remote users are likely to require point of need assistance. There is a need for intervention services and resources such as electronic help pages, and individual consultation via telephone or e-mail. (Nowadays many academic libraries are offering virtual reference services as a way to support remote library users). They state that:

“Higher education faculty and students approach distance learning with the expectation that the experience will be the same as experiences they have had in traditional educational settings ... they expect that their research and informational needs will be the same as for courses and programmes taught in traditional settings.”

Wolpert (1998) explores a number of issues in academic librarianship and distance education. She equates the uniqueness of library services at a distance to the innovation of teaching at a distance. “Just as teaching at a distance is a new ‘product line’ for faculty, so too is library

service at a distance a new ‘product line’ for libraries.” She discusses several ways in which academic libraries can improve the awareness of their importance as a competitive advantage in distance education, including the development of meaningful performance measures.

Many studies have been conducted by a number of institutions to evaluate library services to distance education students. For example Tipton (2001) reports a survey of graduate students at remote sites conducted at Texas A&M in 1999 to assess the library support services for distance learning within the Texas A&M university system. In particular, the study sought to determine the extent to which distant graduate students were aware of library services offered to students at remote sites, and the extent to which the graduate students perceived that their information needs were met. The study focused on the distance learner’s satisfaction levels with library support services, and assessed the students’ use patterns. The study revealed that students were not utilising library services and resources to their full potential. The study recommends better user orientation to services, as well as provision of instruction and searching methods to support distance learners. Echoing the ACRL guidelines sentiments, Tipton also states that “if distance learning programmes are to be credible and successful, the distance learning student must have the same access to library support services as the on-campus student.”

In another study, Lee (1999) identified four areas as critical in supporting a distance learning programme: establishing a collection of materials, providing document services, teaching about library resources and technology, and answering reference and information questions. As can be seen, these areas represent the standard service component of on-campus library services. This validates the assertion made by Wolpert (1998) that in the current phase of development of library services to distant users, libraries are largely replicating the standard library services

provided in the library's physical space, in an electronic environment. However, Dew (2001) emphasized the need for librarians to understand their students and what they want in order to have successful programmes for off-campus students. Dew (2001) further stated that:

“... Librarians tend to focus on disseminating the information that we think our students need. We talk at length to students about library services; we give presentations to them about all kinds of information resources, and we develop Web pages full of information just for them ... occasionally we need to reverse roles, listen instead of talk, and let the students tell us a few things.”

Niemi *et al.* (1998) discussed the characteristics and needs of adult learners in a distance learning environment. They describe adult learners as having vast experience from their work or other various roles in society, more clear-cut goals, and more of an active learning approach than their younger counterparts because of their higher motivation. In terms of the expectations of off-campus adult learners, they suggest that services that need to be enhanced are: Web access, full-text retrieval, speedy document delivery directly to the computer, online reference and electronic communication. These are the same expectations that have been cited in other survey results. With regard to characteristic needs of adult learners, the issue of dealing with new and fast-changing technologies has also been cited by students who voluntarily identified themselves as adult learners. They expressed their frustrations with technology.

Apart from the foregoing issues discussed in the literature, there are numerous other issues related to the institutional cultures of respective universities that impacts on the way libraries position themselves to meet the needs of remote library users. For example, one of the key issues raised by Carty (1991), that would inhibit progress on the development of library services to distance learners, is that some distance education “institutions provide most, if not all of the materials which their students will require, they, therefore see little or no need to provide access

to library resources, or to arm their students with library use skills which will facilitate learning, both during their course and throughout their lifespan". Academic libraries positioning themselves to serve remote students should work in collaboration with the teaching departments and institutional administrators to ensure that as key players in the distance education environment, they share a common vision regarding academic support to remote learners.

Research method

A survey of enrolled University of Maiduguri Distance Learning Unit students was conducted to collect data on their perception and use of the Ramat Libraries' resources and services available to remote students. A total of 12 questions, (some of them with follow-up questions) were asked. They related to: awareness of services and resources offered, use of services and resources offered, and satisfaction with the services and resources offered. These questions were formulated to ascertain the perception, preference, expectation and general information-seeking behaviour of distance learning students. A random sample of 300 respondents were administered the questionnaire and a total of 281 (84%) were retrieved. The data collected were analysed using SPSS.

Findings and Discussion

Students' awareness of Services and Resources

According to the survey results, two third of the respondents indicated that they are aware of most of the services offered by the Ramat Library, however, only half of the respondents are aware of the various categories of resources available in the Library. While most respondents indicated their awareness of the open access collection, less than one third of the respondents only, seem to be aware of specialized collections such as the Bornoana, Nigeriana and the Non-

Book collections. Table 1 gives more details of respondents' awareness of services and resources of the Library.

Table 1: Respondents' awareness of services and resources of the Library.

Services		Aware		Not aware	
		F	%	F	%
Services	Circulation	215	76.5	66	
	Reference		23.4		
	Bibliographic	214	76.2	67	23.8
	SDI	209	74.3		7225.6
	CAS	18766.5		9433.5	
Resources (Print)	Books	163	22.4	118	77.5
	Journals	209	74.4		72
	Specialised collection		25.6		
		138	49.1	143	50.8
	(Non-Book) Audio Visual	86	30.6	195	69.3
Databases		156	55.5		125
			44.4		
		24	8.5		257
			91.4		

Students' use of Services and Resources

Circulation was a heavily used service, with most (95 %) of the students reporting having used the service. Only 10.7 %t of the students had used reference service and less (5.3%) used the Bibliographic services. With regards to resources, the print media especially Books were highly utilised compared to AVs and databases in the non-book category. Details on the utilisation of services and resources are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Respondents' utilisation of Services and Resources of the Library

Services/Resources		Utilised		Not utilised	
		F	%	F	%
Services	Circulation	26595.3		66	23.4
	Reference	5610.2		67	23.8
	Bibliographic	25	5.3	187	66.5
	SDI	72	25.6	209	74.3
	CAS	63	22.4	218	77.5
Resources (Print)	Books	209	74.4	72	
	Journals	25.6			
		138	49.1	143	50.8
	Indexes/Bibliographies	86	30.6	195	69.3
(Non-Book)	Audio Visual	56	10.2	225	89.8
	Databases	24	8.5	257	
		91.4			

Preliminary evaluations of the virtual reference service's use suggest that at least 75 % of the Service's users were Campus students. Finally, only 16 % of the respondents had used instructional resources, such as research tutorials, to develop research skills, or to learn how to find and access library resources.

Student satisfaction with library services

On a four-point Likert scale, 12 % of the respondents reported that it was very easy to find the library materials they needed 57.3 % reported it was easy, 20.3 % reported it was difficult, and 11 % reported it was very difficult. Students were also asked to indicate how complicated it was for them to get the library resources that they needed once they had identified them using the catalogue or other indexes; 9.3 % reported that it was very easy, 57.3 % reported that it was easy, 21.3% reported that it was difficult, and 11% reported that it was very difficult. Most of the

students (65 %) felt that the library offered adequate help and support to remote students and that the services and support met their expectations, while 21.3 % felt that help and support offered by the library to remote students was adequate; 13.3 %disagreed while only 1 per cent strongly disagreed. Of those who felt that help and support were inadequate, 14.7 % suggested that there should be more tutorials, 13.3 % suggested that there should be more reference help, and 12.0 % suggested improved document delivery of library materials.Detail of the analysis is presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Levels of Respondents’ Satisfaction with the Library’s services

s/n	Statement	SA		A		SD		D	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Identifying library materials I needed is always easy	34	12	16	57	31	11	56	20
2	Accessing the material identified is always easy	25	9	16	57	36	13	59	21
3	The library staff offer adequate help to students	18	6	59	21	3	1	36	13
4	I am satisfied with the services and resources of the library	14	5	98	35	14	5	28	10

Most of the students (62.7 %) reported using other libraries for their academic activities. Of those who did so, 52.7 % visited a college library, 33 percent visited a local public library, and 13.3% visited other local special library or information centre.

Correlation analyses were run to determine the strength of the relationship between students reporting that they had enough help, and students reporting that apart from using the Ramat Library resources they also visited a local library. On one hand, out of the number of students who reported that they had adequate library support, 61.2 % of them also visited a local library, while 38.8 % of them did not. On the other hand, out of the total number of students who reported that there was inadequate help, 81.3 % of them used a local library, while only 18.7 %

did not use any local library. This indicates that there is a greater likelihood for students to use a local library when the library services offered by Ramat Library were deemed inadequate. This also points to the importance of developing partnerships with other local libraries in meeting the needs of dispersed students, as it may not be possible to fully meet the needs of users on Distance Learning programme.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has reported results that are largely similar to those of earlier studies conducted to assess library services to students at a distance. The University of Maiduguri study concludes that the key issues surrounding library services to remote users are universal, and must be actively addressed in order to meet successfully the needs of these invisible patrons. Among these issues are:

1. The need to have more of the library resources available in full-text online, including electronic journals, full-text databases, digitized collections, e-books, etc. that are accessible remotely.
2. The need to have effective and expedient document delivery services if students are to access resources that are not available in full-text online.
3. The need for “point of need” assistance – in any of the forms: virtual reference, online tutorials, e-mail or telephone communication with librarians, and other instructive resources that enhance students’ information literacy experiences.
4. The need for off-campus students to have access to a local library to complement the resources and services available to them. This is reflective of the fact that the library has not lost its value as a physical space. i.e. as a place for quiet study, or a place to go and

photocopy material, or even as a place for group discussion of an assignment or project.

It may also be reflective of the fact that library services to off-campus students have not fully matured to the level where they are offering equitable services to both on-campus and off-campus students.

The current research has provided preliminary information that can help enhance library services to Distance Learning students at the University of Maiduguri. No doubt, there are other issues that come into play when planning library services to students at a distance, such as the issue of collaboration with faculty and administrators involved with distance education. A survey of other key players, such as a survey of faculty teaching distance education students, to ascertain their perceptions and expectations of library support for distance education courses/students might shed more light on information seeking behaviour of distance education students. A follow-up survey of distance education faculty may also help facilitate collaboration/partnership of librarians and teaching faculty in providing resources and support services to students at a distance. Only by understanding all key players in the distance education scenario will academic libraries begin to learn how to best meet the needs of remote users. The University of Maiduguri survey on Distance Learning students was a first step toward highlighting library service issues associated in an academic environment, with more work to be done toward further developing a responsive portfolio of services and resources that are of maximum benefit to the distanced academic community.

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