

LIBRARY AND INFORMATION PROVISION FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS IN TANZANIA: SOME RESEARCH AND EVALUATION AREAS TO BE CONSIDERED

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Abstract

The paper discusses some of the library and information provision research and evaluation aspects in the distance education context in Tanzania. It explores some current and potential areas that can be considered for research and evaluation by library and information personnel, scholars and researchers. It does so by providing an overview of research and evaluation aspects for distance education at a global level and specifically for the Tanzania's environment. Some of important broad categories of research and evaluation are identified. These include the distance learner, distance education institutions, libraries and involvement of libraries/information officers, information and communication technology, the role of the publisher and the public recognition of distance education. Out of these, specific areas related to library and information sectors, are highlighted. The paper concludes by urging library and information professionals in Tanzania to seize the opportunity of researching and evaluating the aspects mentioned above, as they (librarians and other information professionals) are an important stake-holder and resource in the distance education systems.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Under conventional and traditional modes of education, a librarian or an information officer is not regarded as an educator but merely a support staff. Under the modern distance education mode, where there is a physical separation between a traditional teacher/lecturer and a distance learner, an information officer (librarian, documentalists, etc.) is increasingly beginning to be recognized as an educator and an equal partner in the process of providing education to distance learners. They play the vital role of providing information to both distance learners, staff and distance education institution by, *inter alia*, selecting, organizing, storing, and disseminating information relevant to their needs.

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As distance learners, by the nature of their mode of study, are more dependant on learning resources and information, it is of paramount significance, therefore, for distance education establishments, evaluators, and researchers to keep on evaluating and researching, from time to time, the effectiveness of the existing systems. Findings derived from such evaluations and research can be used to highlight lessons which need to be learned by institutions currently providing distance education and potential similar organizations in developing countries where conditions are similar to Tanzania. But distance education at university level is a relatively new phenomenon in Tanzania. This explains why, perhaps, there has not been enough research and evaluations.

This paper highlights some of the main research and evaluation areas on distance education and library and information aspects, relevant to Tanzania's distance education environment, which needs the attention of library and information researchers. An attempt is also made to identify some pertinent areas to focus evaluations and research. Most of the examples referred to here are those from the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). This is so because the author has spent considerable amount of his time investigating the learning resource needs of OUT for his doctorate studies (Mcharazo, 1999). Specifically the presentation focuses on the following areas/categories: the distance learner; distance education institutions; libraries; information and communication technology; the role of the publisher; and the public recognition.

2.0 AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION ASPECTS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education, as an applied professional field, needs to be researched and evaluated in order to develop new information and knowledge frontiers that would help to add to the existing body of knowledge on distance education and, improve distance education programmes and performance. Moore (185, 41), though he seems to be more in favour of the grounded theory, quite rightly observe that distance education needs two kinds of research: research which helps to solve problems, and basic research that is research which

tests and extends basic knowledge which is helpful to us all – and that in the theory. In grounded theory the theory can be inductively generated by systematic analysis of empirical data. The theory assumes that the purpose of theory is to promote understanding, and that understanding can only be achieved through the researcher's immersion in data experienced in the context, and the resulting theory is thereby “grounded” in data (Rekkedel, 1994). Some research that was done on the Open University of Tanzania, for example, used grounded research theory (Mcharazo, 1999) (Mcharazo and Olden, 1999)

Globally, a lot of research and evaluations on distance education and related fields, to date, have been conducted, partly to fulfill the above and partly to prove beyond reasonable doubt that distance education is not an extension or branch of the general education theory, and that distance education has its own theory and body of knowledge. The major areas that have been considered for research and evaluations include the use of technology; class formats and effectiveness; class atmosphere; quality and quantity of student-lecturer interaction; course contents; assignments handling; tests, students achievements, student attitude; instructor effectiveness and support services that includes facilitation, use of information and communication technology (ICT), instructor availability and library and information services.

The above analysis clearly suggests that research in distance education has considerably expanded over the last decade and is currently, emerging rapidly in many countries and many academic institutions.

With the availability of ICT facilities and services, it has been possible for academic institutions that offer conventional campus based education to offer courses using distance education modes. There are quite a number of academic institutions (colleges and universities) whose plans are underway to establishing distance education courses. At the University of Dar es Salaam, for example, their institutional transformation programme (ITP) addresses this issue and plans to offer distance education courses in the very near future (Mushi, 2002).

3.0 DISTANCE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH AND EVALUATION IN TANZANIA

The Open University of Tanzania, that was established in 1992, as a full-fledged distance education institution continues to score success in breeding graduates at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels. Quite a number of research and evaluations about OUT have been carried out by its academic staff and other people outside OUT. An interesting comparison here is that in the west much of the research done to date has centred around the use of new technologies for teaching and distance education's effectiveness as a teaching medium – as stated by Garrison (1987, 32) this is so because educational technologists tend to link distance education to technology, and are viewing it as different from other forms of education. At the OUT, the trends are showing that most of the research that has been undertaken is on distance education and its principles with the view of developing knowledge and solving problems that affects the institutions. These areas are on conditions and study motivations; subject-matter analysis; communication between students and tutors (Athanas, 1997) (Sigalla, 1998) and other support organizations; administration and organization, economics and gender aspects (Mwinyichande, 1997) (Kilato, 1997). The recent records available, for example, show that there are three doctoral studies that have been conducted on OUT. In these studies, while Bhalalusesa (1998) highlights experiences of distance learning at university level in Tanzania, Mhehe (2002) addresses women's enrollment and participation issues at OUT, while Mcharazo (1999) addresses the issues of learning resource requirements of OUT students.

However, one of the areas that not much research and evaluation has been done in Tanzania's distance education is on library and information services for distance learners and tutors. The subject usually falls in within the broad category of support services. In a poor developing country like Tanzania where ICT infrastructure is not well developed to reach majority of its citizens who live in rural areas, the use of libraries and other information units is of paramount significance. The planning of distance education and its programmes should take therefore into consideration issues

of information provision by libraries and other information units. And even after establishment of distance education institutions and programmes, there is still a need for carrying out frequent evaluations and research with the purpose of improving performances and generating a body of theoretical knowledge.

4.0 SOME REASERCH AND EVALUATION AREAS THAT NEED TO BE LOOKED INTO

4.1 The distance learner

The most important factor in distance education is that of student independence. This factor is one that influences or introduces new teaching and learning methods to a distance education student. Distance education puts a student in a different learning style. It is important therefore for the students themselves to be fully aware of this fact. Quite a substantial number of Open University students, especially those in their early years, have found it hard to escape their previous conventional learning habits. The students bring with them their past learning experiences and they expect these to be perpetuated in their new distance education teaching and learning environment. As a result, therefore, some of them tend to get frustrated and find the whole programme non-stimulating, their academic performance tends to be less satisfactory, while others have decided to discontinue studies. Also in most cases, the needs of distance learners are not well addressed by information providers. There is a need for more user studies, research, and evaluations to determine the actual needs of this emerging distance education community. Investigation and research that would determine the actual needs of the distant learner would certainly lead to better understanding on how provision of information in libraries and other information units would assist in changing the attitudes and behaviour of current and potential students of distance education. This would assist students and the distance education institutions to overcome their previous "conventional campus based fatigue".

4.2 Distance education institutions

The saying "charity begins at home" is relevant in this context as the very institution that carries out distance education programs must have a certain amount of information readily available for its students. This is not a new concept. Apart from providing study materials for its students, the Open University of the UK, for example, has a well-organized library that can be consulted by its students. The same applies in developing countries like India and Pakistan where facilities such as libraries and communication technology are provided to students. The Open University of Tanzania has its own library located at its headquarters, in Dar es Salaam. Arrangements have also been made with the Tanzania Library Services and other information units such as community resource centres to provide space in its regional libraries for the Open University students. The arrangement works well for those who have access to the libraries and community resource centres. But for majority who live in rural areas, access to these libraries is very limited. Kinyanjui (1998) once observed that:

...a part of the initial planning, for example, may include a review of the communications infrastructure in the country and of the arrangements that can be made for library facilities and other learner support services... by the same token, distance education institutions should be prepared to share their facilities and services with other educational institutions and organisations..."

Indeed, the question evaluators and researchers need to ask themselves is, with the developing world environment, how can distance education institutions be able to provide library and library services that would cater for the needs of its students as effectively as possible? Establishment of more effective libraries, improvement of the existing libraries, establishment and improvement of partnership and collaborative ventures, (Mmari, 1997), use of other information units such as community resource centers, etc. are some of the areas that need to be evaluated and researched into:

Study materials

Study materials are the main source of information, and at times the only source used by distance learners. In an environment where supplementary materials such as books, periodicals, and audio-visual materials are not easily available, it is more likely that study materials become the "Bible". This is often happening in the rural/remote areas. But study materials need to be supplemented by other sources. Also most writers would be writing for distance education for the first time. The question here arises: how would one ensure that the materials are written by experienced and expert writers, bearing in mind that this is their first experience? Qualifications and expertise alone are not enough. These need to be supported with a writing style, which would be suitable for a distance learner. Continuous evaluations on the effectiveness of the existing study materials would certainly ensure, amongst other things, that the materials are written with a distance learner in mind.

Support from regional offices and centres

The majority of students live far away from the distance education institution's headquarters. The present arrangements and plans by OUT, for example, to have a centre in every region is highly commendable. This will ensure that some of the support services can be provided to students by centres that are based close to them. Suggestions based on research and evaluations on the types of information to be provided in these offices and centres would assist students' needs to be served within the regions.

4.2.1 Libraries and involvement of librarians/information officer

Libraries

Libraries have been found to be amongst the most important organisations supporting distance education students. Provision of services such as lending of reading materials, advisory, reference, and provision of reading space ensure that distance education students place a special value on them. What is important is for the students to be aware of the importance of libraries. The evidence collected from OUT experience, for example, shows that students, to varying degrees, do use different types of libraries. Though public

libraries are the most used, evidence has also shown that the students also use secondary school libraries, high school libraries, college libraries, and university libraries. There is evidence that government and non-governmental organizations' libraries and resources are also used.

The ideal public library was a "people's university". It undoubtedly is to the distance education students who depend so much on it. If this is the case then its planning, strategies, and development should be geared towards serving its communities regardless of their geographic locations. This has not been fully realized yet due to, amongst other reasons, lack of resources. To date there are regions and several districts which do not have public libraries.

It is also true that almost all the public library branches are facing a serious shortage of reading materials. It is understood that this is due to the government's failure to provide Tanzania Library Service with adequate funds. As a result there have been no purchases of new books for quite some time now. Most of the Tanzania library services' acquisitions come from philanthropic organization. It is estimated that Book Aid International's donations to Tanzania Library Services amount to over 90% of its total acquisitions. The situation is a disappointment to both information providers and information users such as distance education students. The significant question that the managers, evaluators and researchers need to ask themselves is how best the libraries can readdress problems of inadequacy of reading materials faced by their clients? Selection policies, user studies, orientation programmes, services to rural-based students, staff adequacy, out-reach services and services for the handicapped (Bagandanshwa, 1998) have been earmarked as the most important research and evaluation areas to be addressed.

Involvement of librarians/information officers

It is maintained that the most important strategy for distance education administrator is contacting the university's education librarian. Distance education scholars such as Wright and Howell (2004) have always maintained that:

“...librarians are not only an overlooked resource of tremendous value to some university faculty, but even more so to distance education administrators... Librarians, by their very role at a university specialize in knowing what is current and available in their subject area, how best to access it, and how to best provide patron support, e.g. interlibrary loan, faculty delivery, and related services to the administrator... Their satisfaction derives from patron success: finding what patrons need and in helping patrons advance their area or research...”

The above quotation speaks for itself, as far as the role of the librarian and the information officer is concerned, and their centrality in planning for distance education and, selection, organization (including packaging and repackaging), storing and preservation, distribution and dissemination of reading resources and information for distance learning. As for the Tanzanian situation, research and evaluations is required on the above aspects and, on how librarians and information officer can best assist distance education planners and administrators in planning and providing support services for the distance education community: students, lecturers, researchers, consultants and administrators.

4.3 Information and communications technology

In this age of science and technology, it is not possible for distance education institutions and its students to continue to depend solely on print-based materials. Otherwise there would be little distinction between a correspondence course and an Open University course that is usually a more advanced form of distance education.

Globally, and especially in the developed world, much of the research in distance education is centred around the use of ICTs for teaching and learning. As explained earlier, this is so because most educational technologists associate distance education with technology. The technical ICT business communities also take advantage in conquering this new

market, hence more research and evaluations are conducted and more ICT-based materials for distance education are produced. The research and invention, thereafter, of tele-technology for two way communication and interaction between distance learners and lecturer, and group based learning through audio and video-conferencing, audio graphics, telephone and fax applications for individual tutoring have proved extremely useful for distance education institutions and their students and lecturers. But there is also awareness of the costs involved in preparing material and making it available to students. Bates' (1988) advice is that distance education institutions should also be "investing in more immediate and practical issues, such as monitoring student access to equipment, studying the design implications of video-cassettes, evaluating new types of course design based on the new technology, and studying the cost and organizational implications of introducing new technology".

As for Tanzania, it is an established fact that information technology is barely accessible to most distance learners, especially those who live in rural areas and far away from district and regional administrative centres. As many students see the need to supplement study materials with audio-visual materials, any research and evaluations towards this direction would immensely benefit them. On top of the Bates' list, other areas that research and evaluations can be focused are on the potential and usefulness of all kinds of ICT-information based resources such as computers, radio, video, CD ROMS, fax machines, audio materials, etc. and the impact and effectiveness of IT media, and how they can reach the wider audience. As Sadiq (2003, 10) quite rightly observes "more research is needed to compare and investigate how different approaches for the design and development of user-friendly interfaces, interactive, easy to use and accessible learning tutorials, quality course content..." The aspects are equally relevant to Tanzania's situation.

4.4 The role of the publisher

The methods of teaching and learning for distance education are playing a significant role in making a publisher realize that there is a different market out there that is not well

served. This suggests that there is a new window of opportunity for educational writers and publishers who can appeal to the needs of distance education students, and in this case the OUT students. Easy readers and simplified versions of technical books in fields such as science and law can widely attract students. The writer of this paper still recalls some of his former lecturers' books that were and still are popular amongst students studying 'O' level history in Tanzania. They were simple and better illustrated than the recommended textbooks (Mcharazo, 1999). Perhaps educational authors and publishers should carry out studies that would clearly establish the need for these materials amongst the distance learner's community.

Of course closely associated with publishing is the fact that this will contribute towards revamping bookshops that, for quite some time now, have not had adequate reading materials to sell. Public library collections will also be improved by the provision of the newly published materials for distance learning students. The main beneficiaries will be distance learners. But the certain expansion of distance education at university level in Tanzania and other countries in developing world will bring opportunities and rewards for publishers also.

4.5 Public recognition

Although distance education is not new in Tanzania, the Open University idea is new to most people. It is new to employers, to information providers, and to the general public at large. Psychologically, this is likely to raise a certain amount of suspicion amongst the general public. Some may perceive it as second-class education. Others, carrying past experiences of conventional education, may harbor some thoughts that a distance education degree is not as good as a conventional degree. This can be one of the reasons why many students have found their employers less co-operative in supporting them. So there is a need to change this misguided public perception. Other academic institutions, current and potential employers, and the general public at large need to be enlightened more on the significance of distance education for national development. Distance education institutions should be in the fore-front of this

exercise. This will help current and future employers to provide more support to their students who wish to through the distance education mode.

5.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Distance education does not depend solely on the information provided by a distance education institution. The nation-wide information provision, which includes that of the distance education institutions, is the only solution to the information needs and problems faced by distance learners and distance educators. And information managers cannot serve their communities effectively unless they are aware of what communities really need. This calls for more research and evaluations. As the above analysis shows, distance education at the university level together with the distance education community that is comprised of institutions, staff, students, researchers, consultants and various systems create a wider scope for evaluations and research in distance education and libraries and information provision. And this also creates a wide scope for librarians and information managers to evaluate and research distance education in Tanzania and elsewhere.

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