

## **The Role of Librarians In Support Of Information Needs of Students in Open and Distance Education in the Digital Era.**

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**Abstract:** *This paper general overview is on open and distance education and Information service available to students in open and distance education. The researchers discussed current issues on information service in support of open and distance education, importance and types of information services support for distance education programmes, technologies used in delivery information services in open and distance education, importance of ICT In distance education, concepts of distance education in Nigeria, value of social media (networking) in delivering information service to distance learners and as well as challenges of open and distance education in Nigeria.*

**Key Words:** *Open and Distance education, ICTs, Social media (networking),*

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### **I. Introduction**

Libraries are indispensable in every facet of higher education. Effective library support to distance learners is mandatory for qualitative delivery of knowledge and learning. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has transformed all aspects of society particularly information dissemination. Libraries have an inherent obligation to provide information service to support the educational, recreational and economic endeavours of the members of their respective communities as appropriate to the libraries individual mission. Information services in libraries take variety of forms including direct personal assistance, directories, signs, exchange of information culled from a reference source, reader's advisory service, dissemination of information in anticipations of their user needs or interest. The term open and distance education reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner, and that the missions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure.

### **II. Open And Distance Education**

The term Open and distance learning or education reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from learner, and the mission includes greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. The meaning open and distance education above is of the same view with Aina, (2004) who Submitted that "it is a type of education that is delivered from a **distance to the learners**. The historical evolution of distance learning systems has been in four main phases. Open and distance learning systems can usually be described as made up of a range of components such as the mission or goal of a particular system, programmes and curricula, teaching/ learning strategies and techniques, learning material and resources, communication and interaction, support and delivery systems, students, tutors, staff and other experts, management, housing and equipment and evaluation. (RUSA, 2000). There is a physical separation between the learner and the teacher. Thus, it includes one which others may refer to as a means of the printed and written word, the telephone, computer conferencing or teleconferencing used to bridge the physical gab between the instructor and the learner. Open and Distance education equally involves the provision of whatever educational opportunities that are needed by anyone, anywhere, at any time for those who otherwise would have been denied. Improving the quality of education through the diversification of contents and methods and promoting experimentation, innovation, the diffusion and sharing of information and best practices as well as policy dialogue are UNESCO's strategic objectives in Education (UNESCO, 2002 and 2005).

Open and distance education is often used synonymously with "Open Learning" correspondence education' and external study". For example in Nigeria there is the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), External studies Programme, University of Ibadan and Distance Learning Institute of the University of Lagos. Open and Distance education programmes in Africa are provided generally in two organizational

models. There is the single model, in which, distance education programme as the sole mandate of the university, does not offer its programme full- time on campus; rather its mandate is to provide education at distance. This type of model exists in many countries. The second model is the dual model in which a university operates both the full- time on campus programme and distance education simultaneously. Both sets of learner follow the same curriculum and qualifications obtained at the end of the programme are the same. This model is the more common model available in many universities in Africa.

### **Purpose Of The Study**

To determine the role of librarians in support of information needs of students in Distance Education, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To ascertain ICT tools that can be used to provide information services for distance learner. Discuss the importance of social network (media) in Distance learning programme. Ascertain the factors militating against Distance Education programmes in Nigeria.

### **Scope Of The Study**

The work is on the role of librarians in support of information needs of students in open and distant education in the digital age. The work is limited to Nigeria. It tried to access the types of Open and Distant education operational in Nigeria and how their information needs are met.

### **Importance Of Ict In Open And Distance Education**

Promoting the development of a knowledge society through Open and distance education is one of the tactics increasingly adopted in recent times by government around the world who want to encourage economic development at the local, state and national levels. However, advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have posed complex problem for colleges and universities in Africa, especially in their distance education programmes to reaching the goal of promoting the development of a knowledge society. Despite the challenges of ICTs in Open and distance education, the importance of it cannot be overemphasis, because it had created great impact to education in the following ways:

- ❖ ICT is very essential, the use of computer activate the senses of sight, hearing, and creative ability.
- ❖ UNESCO youth forum of 31<sup>st</sup> general conference stressed the need using ICT in distance educational management, which include administrative, function like finance budgeting, personnel selection accounting (in distance education) are done through ICT
- ❖ It provides computer technicians and engineers in order to revolutionize educational system.
- ❖ ICT is used in distance learning to ensure both asynchronous and synchronous communication
- ❖ ICT promote both teacher-student and student-student interaction in distance place
- ❖ With ICT in open and distance educational learning you complete most of the classes at your own pace without pressure or tress
- ❖ Gain extra knowledge while you are learning -taking those computer and internet skills you gain and then applying them to other facets of your life.
- ❖ It require no commuting-therefore saving your money and time.
- ❖ Accessibility facetals-distance education course address the physical accessibility issues that people with mobility problems oftentimes encounter while being enrolled in the traditional on campus classes etc.

### **Challenges of open and distance education in Nigeria.**

Despite the keenness by institutions of higher learning to establish distance education programs, they are confronted with enormous problems that may have impeded its proper implementation. Some of these problems are: Poor ICTs penetration and usage among Nigerian distance education practitioners. Approximately almost all African countries basic ICTs infrastructures are inadequate; this is as a result of problem of electricity to power the ICTs materials, poor telecommunication facilities, and poor postal system. Above all the lacks of access to the needed infrastructures which is as a result of insufficient funds.

According to Yusuf (2006: 22-29), successful distance education cannot be assured without the use of effective communication and technological tools (e-mail, fax, Internet, television, radio, etc.). Several cities and rural areas in Nigeria are yet to have or have fluctuation in electricity supply. Just like electricity, most Nigerians do not have access to telephone and other telecommunication facilities. Even, telephone lines in the urban centres are not adequate to serve the teeming population. Services for those who have access are in most cases epileptic. These may make the integration of telecommunication in the delivery of distance education difficult. In addition, poor state of telephone has led to increase in diaiup cost for most Nigerians. Even with the recent introduction of GSM in August, 2001, access is still limited and services are yet to be perfect and service charge may make GSM unattractive for distant learners. Poor economic situations and its effects on middle level manpower, stands as the major obstacle towards the implementation of ICTs in distance education. Even an average middle income earner cannot afford basic technological and communication gadgets. Thus, computer

related telecommunication facilities might not be useful for most Nigerians, as computer is still a luxury in institutions, offices and homes. This has made the integration of necessary on-line resources (e-mail, newsgroups, worldwide-web, etc.) into distance education in Nigeria most difficult.

Similarly, Nwachukwu Ubogu and Ossai (2010) cited UNESCO (1998), Igwe (2005) and Nwagwu and Ahanihe (2006), efforts to improve ICT access in Africa have been hampered by a number of factors, these are summarized as follows:

- Prospective ICT users that have expertise, competencies and equipment to benefit from access to electronic information networks are minute in number;
- There is a shortage and high cost of equipment, software and information compared to situations in the industrialized nations;
- There is lack of reliable and accessible physical telecommunications infrastructure; telecommunications monopoly, associated with overly restrictive regulations and high costs, and
- Lack of interregional networking and cooperation amongst national universities and international institutions.

In the same vein, Commonwealth of Learning International (2001), made it clear also that the inadequacy of essential services and infrastructure like electricity, telecommunications and postal services must be developed to levels that could support the declared scale of open and distance education in order to increase administrative network and develop a proper link between faculty and students learning. Perhaps, another most serious challenge facing distance education at this level in Nigeria is the need for the integration of new ICT literacy knowledge into academic courses and programs. This state of affairs grew mainly from the political isolation that Nigeria experienced during the military eras. Nigeria's professionals were not able to benefit from international assistance and lack of international networking and cooperation or from courses, conferences and seminars abroad. This denial of assistance and interaction has adverse consequences, both on the psyche of faculty and on the development of infrastructure necessary for professional development (COL International, 2001).

#### **Overview of information service in support of open and distance education.**

Information service takes on some attribute of reference service. However, it is necessary to focus on it so as to articulate its distinct character. The term information means relevant data, fact or idea available for useful purpose. Thus, information service set out to identify, provide the use of documents or piece of information which could best help the user in his study, teaching or research. An information service may have to devise the appropriate package through which information is to be passed on. The requirement is usually for speedy and reasonably accurate information. No information service can function effectively without an organised collection of books and related materials, and that is where library comes into play as an indispensable institution in information storage and retrieval. (Nwakaohu, 2008).

As we earlier said, libraries have an inherent obligation to provide information service to support the educational, recreational, personal and economic endeavours of the members of the respective communities; then the librarians that works in different communities must be knowledgeable with various type of information services so that their relevance in the communities will be noticed by all people. Libraries and librarians are as important to distance education or learning as they are to face to face education. A librarian needs to understand the mechanics and concepts of Distance Education (DE) to provide effective distance library service. When the librarians and libraries knows the appropriate mission and vision of establishing OPEN and DISTANCE EDUCATION in a country and their provision of services will now have great impact to the communities they serves.

Distance education students needs to partner with the library because librarians will be supporting the students research needs. The librarian is an integral part of the distance education team because the library is a storehouse of knowledge; each student must be able to access that knowledge to its fullness. The librarian helps the student navigate through the storehouse. Successful implementation of a distance education programme means everyone on the team must have a learner-focus. Continuous monitoring of the programme is necessary to keep the quality high. Careful analysis is needed to see what is working and what needs changing.

#### **Roles Of Librarian On Information Services In Support Of Open And Distance Education Programme.**

Distance education is important in developing countries, especially Nigeria, because of the lack of opportunities for many people to undergo full-time university education after secondary education. But with open and distance education opportunities exist for those who have full-time employment to still pursue education and thereby enhancing their career advancement of recent, many researchers have been investigating the adequacy of library and information services support for open and distance education programmes in Africa. However, research had shown that library and information support services to distance education learners in the universities surveyed were almost non-existent or not adequate, except the university of South Africa and

Africa Virtual University, Nairobi Kenya which used modern information technology to provide library and information services to its learners. Oladokun (2002) and Kavulya (2004) cited by Aina (2008). In Nigeria, Mabawonka (2004) surveyed 369 Open and distance education learners from universities of Ibadan, Lagos and Ilorin. The study revealed that Open and distance education learners were hardly served by the three university libraries.

Based on the above studies, the paper will now highlight the role of librarians in support for Open and distance programme on into services. These information services includes:-

- ❖ Social media (networking) services
- ❖ Virtual reference services
- ❖ Access to catalogue OPAC / Computerized system.
- ❖ Bibliographic searches services
- ❖ Bibliographic instruction (BI) and information literacy (IL)
- ❖ Consultation services with distance librarian
- ❖ Access to inter-library loan services
- ❖ Online user education services
- ❖ Document delivery service (DDS) etc

**SOCIAL MEDIA (NETWORKING) SERVICES:** This is one of the fastest and current services that **World class librarian or Distance education librarian** can offered to learners of all kinds in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A social networking service is an online service, platform, or site that focuses on building and reflecting of social networks or social relations among people, who, for example, share interests and/or activities. A social network service essentially consists of a representation of each user (often a profile), his/her social links, and a variety of additional services. Most social network services are web based and provide means for users to interact over the Internet, such as e-mail and instant messaging. Online community services are sometimes considered as a social network service, though in a broader sense, social network service usually means an individual-centered service whereas online community services are group-centered. Social networking sites allow users to share ideas, activities, events, and interests within their individual networks (wiki 2011). The term social networking simply refers to a process of relationship building among a group of people who have a common interest. It allows professionals to exchange information, opportunities and ideas; professionals are able to stay informed with new knowledge about their field. Social networks are also being used by teachers, lecturers and students as a communication tool because many students are already using a wide-range of social networking sites. The use of online social networks by libraries and information organizations is also increasingly prevalent and a growing tool that is being used to communicate with more potential library users, as well as extending the services provided to individual libraries.

(Namli, etal 2010).

The various social networking sites for stance education librarian or World class Librarian that can used to provide services at both international and national levels includes Facebook, Myspace, 2go, Snaptu, UC Browser, Opera mini, Twitter which widely used worldwide. There wed sites help people to build up network and relationships among themselves. In addition to these sites, various web 2.0 techniques may be used to develop better relationships among people.

The national social media used by particular international countries include-Nexopia (Canada); Bebo, VKontakte, Hi5, Hyves (Netherlands), Draugiem.lv (mostly in Latvia), StudiVZ ( Germany), iWiW ((Hungary), Tuenti (Spain), Nasza-Klasa (Poland), Decayenne, Tagged, XING, Badoo and Skyrock in parts of Europe; Orkut and Hi5 in South America and Central America; and Mixi, Multiply, Orkut, Wretch, renren and Cyworld in Asia and the Pacific Islands and linkedin Google+ and Orkut are very popular in India. There have been attempts to standardize these services to avoid the need to duplicate entries of friends and interests (see the FOAF standard and the Open Source Initiative). A 2011 survey found that 47% of American adults used a social network to access information. One of the good things about the sites is that the applications are acceptable in many of our camera phones owned by users of the library such as **Blackberry, Nokia phones, Tecno, IP computer, IP phones, LG products, Samsung, and others.**

**VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICES:** In open and distance education (ODE) environment, students can use forms to make research queries, either in print or electronically. In the form, "trigger"or "prompt" questions replace face-to-face assistance in helping the student to properly complete a request. Institutions that already have dedicated library telephone services can use them for distance learning (DL) reference inquires. Some institutions with Web-convenient access point, such as Athabasca university's Digital Reference Center (<http://library.athabasca.ca/drc.>). From the websites the distance education librarian offered distance learners a good information services for education purposes.

**ACCESS TO CATALOGUE OPAC/ COMPUTERIZED SYSTEM:** Rapid breakthrough in new information and communication technologies has changed the knowledge is developed, acquired, access, and delivered. Distance education librarian or world class librarian can automate their card catalogue online to assist students get what they needed without using the manual system catalogue. OPAC can be access without leaving their offices or home. All the computer terminals in an organization are linked together. Example of OPAC is the one of University of Botswana library and user can search for both bibliographic and full- text databases on external search service or CD- ROM.

**BIBLIOGRAPHIC SEARCH SERVICES:** In some cases, and where enough staff is available librarians execute full searches for distance learners. Another way is to provide a student manual on conducting bibliographic searches which explains search methods, such as moving from general to specific questions, and lists basic texts, journals and reference sources in various disciplines. More detailed "HELP manual can also be developed on disciplines- by- discipline basis. This could be in electronic form-online or on CD-ROM. By so doing, collection development librarians, reference librarians, students and researchers can conveniently and effectively access information.

**BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION (BI) INFORMATION LITERACY (IL) SERVICES:** Librarians must help learners of distance education institutions to access, evaluate and use information effectively and efficiently. For delivery BL and IL instructions at a distance, librarians take on a more active teaching, rather than facilitative role. For instance, central emeeting [http://www. centraow.com](http://www.centraow.com) is an electronic communication utility that has been used successfully to delivery BI at a distance. While radio, web-based IL tutorial software computer and video conferencing are used to delivery BI and IL services to distance education learners.

**CONSULTATION SERVICES WITH LIBRARIAN:** Consultation services in distance education can be conducted through email, toll-free telephone services, pre- packaged email out information or scheduled remote site visits. Institutions that have a toll free telephone service should if possible also use it for library consultation. The frequency and duration of remote library site visits depend on the institutions DL budget, as well as how far the sites are from the parent institution. But Institutions with large number of overseas students may not have the funds for site visits where as those with students within a reasonable distance can schedule frequent visits.

**ACCESS TO INTER-LIBRARY LOAN SERVICES:** These inter-library loan services in distance education can be either charged to the students' user, or paid through an arrangement between the contracting institution and the library providing the service, Pre-packaged information commercial vendors such as Questia, XanEDU, and e-library can also be used for DL, through subscription or pay- per -use. Provision of free access to inter-loan information materials should be the most concern of Distance education librarian, because distance learners need are to access information resources, such texts supplementary reading and reference services; learning how to find the information that is available.

**DOCUMENT DELIVERY SERVICE (DOS):** Documents are carriers of information. If the documents required by Distance learners are not available to them. The library therefore renders document delivery services to their patrons. The use of the manual system in documents delivery has over years not yield the desired results. Therefore, ICT- based document delivery of such documents in digitalized format through the electronic mail. There are several ICT based document delivery service providers world -wider one example of which is the British Library Document supply Service (BLDSS). Distance education librarian can adopted document delivery service so that information seekers to have access to and use library collection without stress. From these method downloading are made easy.

**ONLINE USER EDUCATION SERVICES:** The need of user education service is very importance in open and distance education; because the resources must be put to optimal use by patrons, hence, importance of ICT-based user education service cannot therefore be over-emphasised. Library orientation programme can be made available to the distance users through e-mail, discussion groups, Weblog, e-bulletin board's, e-lectures, e-seminars e-workshops. etc.

### **Emerging Technologies For Distance Education Librarian To Support Information Service Of Institutions**

Emerging technologies is meant those new and important technological developments in the field of ICTs, especially the World Wide Web are always evolving. (Adomi, 2009). Therefore, there are great tasks for Distance education librarian or World class Librarian and libraries to keep tract of the latest developments in the field in order to ensure that user (Distance Learners) are made to take advantage of the current technological

resources and services. New technologies allow libraries and information centre to provide a better service to users by offering simple access to what they want, when they want it and how they want it. These new technologies include:

- ❖ BLOGS (Web log)
- ❖ Web 2.0 or lib 2.0
- ❖ RSS (Rich Site Summary)
- ❖ WIKIS
- ❖ PODCASTS
- ❖ VODCASTS
- ❖ INSTANT MESSAGE (TEXT BASED CHAT)
- ❖ WEBFORMS
- ❖ VIDEO-CONFERNING OR WED-CAM SERVICES
- ❖ E-MAIL
- ❖ BASIC E-MAIL
- ❖ DIGITAL REFERENCE ROBOTS
- ❖ CAMERA PHONE
- ❖ IP CAMERA
- ❖ YOU TUBE
- ❖ VSAT (VERY SMALL APERTURE TERMINAL) and
- ❖ SATELLITE DISHES etc.

### III. Conclusion

Open and Distance education is popular among universities in Africa, particularly Nigeria, unfortunately, the universities do not provide adequate library and information services support to the learners. The survival of tertiary education institution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will increasingly rely on various forms of electronic delivery and communication inside a market place that request education to be flexible. Learning is now widely used in most of the developed countries to promote distance education (DE) and life long learning in an effective way. In Nigeria, the recent development and awareness of the government on ICT have opened an opportunity to adopt e-learning to delivers distance education for educating mass of its uneducated or less educated peoples. Libraries can use this opportunities of social media facilities to provide information service to students especially the distance learners.

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