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## **Information and Communication Technologies for Educational Development: The Case of Cybercafés at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria**

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### **Introduction**

Information is an important tool used in the realization of any objective set by individuals. It is a valuable resource required in the society; thus acquiring and using information are critical and important activities. Information seeking is a fundamental human process closely related to learning and problem solving (Marchionini, 1995). Many factors initiate the search for information. In recent years, new digital technologies have fostered rapid expansion as well as change in profile.

It is generally acknowledged that the information and knowledge age is here and has in fact been with mankind since the last decades of the second millennium. It is a known fact that a nation cannot develop in isolation of her human resources. Universities are important agents in the development of human resources of a nation.

The computerization of university libraries in Nigeria is an ongoing process. Nigerian universities are still at the crawling stage of automation in their library services, compared with their counterparts all over the world. In Nigeria, the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library is leading the world of library automation. The first phase of its computerization was completed in 1997. Since then, about 12,000 bibliographic data have been entered into its data-base. The second phase of its computerization project is nearing completion. When completed, the library will be offering its users an on-line public access (OPAC) to its local database, a library website, a two point Internet access in the Reference Section of the Library and on-line access to "Infotrac online", a remote online database.

### **Increasing Access to Computer and the Internet**

Access to goods, services and information, to say nothing of employment and way of communicating is increasingly dependent on ones ability to use information technology and the Internet. But how are people expected to learn about and access such technology? The combination of education and technology are considered the main Key to human progress. Education feeds technology, which in turn forms the basis for modern learning. For educational systems to be efficient we need multimedia and information technology. The effective use of technology requires appropriate skills, know-how and information services in addition to access itself. The creation of "information poor": that is the section of population excluded from the information society may occur not simply as a consequence of lack of money but may be as a result of absence of training and other support networks to learn about the potential of the technology and to provide a context in which people feel comfortable using it. It can also

come about from an absence of services tailored to the needs of particular groups or to the ways in which they want to access information.

### **Types of Public Access Facilities**

In 1998, the University started a Computer Centre in the Faculty of Technology where the staff and students used the Internet facilities. The Obafemi Awolowo University has also several cybercafés in the environment. Cybercafés are conventional information technology centers. They offer computer and Internet services to customers for sending and receiving information.

Two of the cybercafés at Obafemi Awolowo University (O.A.U) were established in 2001. Four of them were established in 2002. The last two were established in 2003 and 2004. The cybercafés in the campus were functioning on radio wireless connections shared with the University Information Technology Unit (INTECU) as their Internet Service Provider (ISP) and they provide services 24 hours a day. Out of the eight cybercafés discussed in this paper, only Infinite Grace has a dedicated network that is different from the university network. First Net and Café El Dorado later switched over to use of dedicated Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT). About 50 percent of the cybercafés are located in student residential areas. The rest are located in College and office areas.

### **Definition of Cybercafés**

Cybercafés refer to establishments where the main business is the provision of on line Internet services and or other computer services. In fact, cybercafés is another off shoot of information technology (IT), turning out to be a fast growing business. Cybercafés counter the high cost of PC and Net connection.

### **Some Services on the Internet**

The Internet is the greatest exponent of information revolution. It is now a main source of, and the main channel for vital information. It offers the largest reservoir of vital information in the world. All types of information are on the Internet, from simple common domestic to highly technical; from simple instructions to full professional teachers (Onyekwelu, 1999). The ability to use information technology is becoming increasingly important in every facet of life. The information technology used creatively can make a difference in the way teachers teach and the way students learn. Mercy (2003) noted that access to computers, the Internet and the ability to effectively use this technology are becoming increasingly important to full participation in the global world. The Internet is a world-wide community that electronically links leading-edge thinkers and ordinary people, government, and business, the world's leading universities and high schools, job hunters and employers with tens of millions of members, one of the world's most powerful "clubs". Cyberspace and its Web constitute a field that stimulates the unequal and equitable exchanges that characterize the present day world of globalization. The Internet is part of the process of producing, consuming and distributing knowledge (Kennedy, 1995). The impact of the Internet on the society lies in its extra ordinary potential for being all things to all people. More fundamentally, there is in fact a close fit – a critical interlock – between the structures and processes of the Internet, and the main structures and processes of university teaching and learning Rudenstine (1996). The Internet is not only felt in higher institutions of learning it has also opened a new avenue and forum for commerce known as e-commerce (electronic commerce). Trade and commerce on the Internet are doubling every year.

## Purpose of the Study

Information is the key to innovations and self-sustaining development. It is the vehicle that carries all development efforts at all levels of human endeavour. This study therefore intends:

- To determine the number of Cybercafés available at Obafemi Awolowo University Campus.
- To ascertain the quality of Internet services rendered to the university community and how well they meet the users needs.
- To examine the use of Cybercafés/Internet resources, and
- To evaluate their usefulness.

## Methodology

About eight cybercafés located in the University community were used in this study eliciting such information as their location, year of establishment, the number of PCs being used, types of connections they have, working hours etc.

The data used for this study consists of questionnaires, interviews with the cybercafés owners as well as personal observations made during inspection of the cafés. The questionnaire was divided into 3 parts. A section of the questionnaire is directed to the users on the cybercafés, another section to the staff and the last section of the questionnaire is directed to the operators of the cybercafés. But the analysis was carried out in five parts.

- The background of the Internet users including gender, age
- The skill levels for using the Internet, including history of its use, time spent on the Internet
- Information seeking behaviour and the Internet
- The users evaluation of Internet resources and;
- The users expectations of Internet services

## Findings

Table I shows the number of computers each cybercafés has. Shekinah Online has the least number of computers while the University Conference Centre has the largest number of computers. The number of computers in the Cybercafés range from 7 to 32.

## Printing

All the cybercafés have printing facilities. Some provide scanning facilities as well as video conferencing. Some have colour printers. Only three of the eight cybercafés have fax machines.

Table 1: Distribution of Facilities

Name	Number of Computer(s)	Printers	Fax Machine	Telephone
Shekinah Online	7	1	-	Yes
Cybernet	12	1	-	Yes
Café' El Dorado	15	1	-	Yes
Cyber Haven	17	2	-	Yes
C@fenet (Rotunda)	17	2	-	Yes
First Net	25	2	Yes	Yes
Conference Centre	32	3	Yes	Yes
Infinite Grace	25	3	Yes	Yes

### Telephone Facilities

All the cybercafés have telephone facilities.

### Staff

Table 2 shows the number of staff in each cybercafé. The number of staff ranges from 3 to 6. CyberNet and Most of the cybercafés are staffed by students. The qualification of the operators vary from Senior Secondary School Certificates to degree or diploma in software engineering. More males are employed in the cybercafés than females. The ages employees range from 18-35 years.

Table 2: Staff Distribution

Name	No. of Staff	Average age by sex	Male	Female
Shekinah Online	5	20-29	3	2
Cyber El Dorado	6	18-32	4	2
Cybernet	3	20-25	1	2
Cyber Haven	3	20-27	3	-
C@Fenet (Rotunda)	6	20-30	3	3
First Net	4	25-50	3	1
Conference Centre	4	18-30	2	2
Infinite Grace	6	21-25	3	3

### User Population Analysis

Table 3 shows the use distribution of the cybercafés under survey. The average time spent at these cybercafés ranges between one to two hours. The age of the people making use of the cybercafés range from 18-45 years. The average number of people that patronize each café per day is also indicated on this table.

From interviews with owners, staff, and some users, it was gathered that young men are the biggest group of the Internet users while female usage is increasing more slowly. Out of 100 responses,

men comprise 60.75 percent, while females comprise 39.23 percent. More than half of the respondents are students. Users with science backgrounds comprise more than 68 percent.

Among the questionnaires, the biggest population came from those respondents in the sciences 67.28 percent; Social sciences comprises 20.12 percent and the humanities are 12.60 percent (See Table 4).

Table 3: Use Distribution

Name	Average patronage per day	Age Range	Average Time Spent
Shekinah Online	100	18-30	1 hr
Cyber El Dorado	150	18-30	1 hr
Cybernet	100	18-30	1 hr
CyberHaven	100	18-30	1 hr
C@Fenet (Rotunda)	100	18-30	1 hr
First net	25	18-30	1 hr
Conference Centre	150	18-45	2 hrs
Infinite Grace	70	18-45	2hrs

Table 4: User Distribution in Social Sciences, Humanities and Sciences

Sciences	67.28 percent
Social Sciences	20.12 percent
Humanities	12.60 percent

### Using the Internet: Levels of Access and Competence

More than 50 percent of the responses described users having a 2-5 year history of accessing the Internet. Forty-six percent of the users learnt to start using the Internet by self-instruction; 35 percent learnt from colleagues or friends. Only 6.77 percent of respondents learned how to use the Internet through training courses; 7.33 percent learnt by reading books, newspapers and other publications while 3 percent initiated their use from study abroad (Table 5). The data indicates that people start to use the Internet in a very informal way, such as personal communication and learning-by-doing.

Table 5: The Methods of Learning the use of the Internet

Channels	Percentage
Self Instruction	46.12
Introduction by colleagues	35.68
Training courses	6.77
Books, newspapers or other media	7.33
Experience abroad	3.39
Total	99.29
No answer	0.71

The consensus and evaluation of the Internet from users perspective is very helpful for us to compare with other traditional information resources and to learn what are the most important advantages of the Internet. Table 6 shows that people have a positive consensus on the Internet because of its richness in resources (4.02), ease of use (3.98), and speed of information transfer (3.88). The satisfaction with its friendly interface (3.59), and availability (3.46). From the user experiences, the Internet is a unique platform for gathering various kinds of information resources and providing a network in disseminating these information resources efficiently throughout the world but its disadvantages are more marked in its variety, speed and ease of use, rather than in the quality of information content.

Table 6: The Consensus of Internet Attributes (in ( percent) percentage)

Attribute/Consensus	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Average
Rich in resource	0.88	3.96	18.94	44.79	31.42	4.02
Easy to use	1.60	3.35	19.10	47.38	28.57	3.98
Fast in information transfer	2.80	6.49	22.42	36.58	31.71	3.88
Friendly interface	1.2	4.65	40.78	41.38	11.99	3.58
Availability	2.83	12.65	35.57	33.48	15.48	3.46
Unique in resource	1.65	15.12	53.89	22.75	6.59	3.18
Accuracy	2.68	19.94	55.36	19.79	2.23	2.99
Authority	5.37	23.58	57.01	11.79	2.24	2.82

Table 7: Channels of Obtaining Information (by educational degree) (in percentage percent)

Channel/Education	Above Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Grade	Doctorate
Search Engine	72.85	77.6	75.2	79
Web link	7.8	18.95	43.4	46.5
Journal and book	28.85	37.5	39.75	30.2
Database	7.8	24.2	38	34
Library Catalogue	18.2	23.4	20	20.2
College Communication	2.3	2.98	9.4	18
Document reference and citation	7.9	20.65	10.2	15.5
Bookshop	2.4	7.98	7.8	9.8
Private Collection	0.0	7.76	23.7	35.7
International and National Conference	18.1	32	39	39.6

For the motivation and purpose of the use of the Internet, 79.5 percent of respondents answered that they look for specialized subject information; 42.9 percent for following up the latest progress in their disciples; 38.2 percent intend to seek information but cannot find it elsewhere; and 14 percent use it to communicate with colleagues at home or abroad. Data shows that the Internet is regarded as an important information resource since the use of the Internet is highly relevant to people's work, research and professional development.

## **Information-Seeking Behaviour in Using the Internet**

The study found that, in the Internet age, there are many channels of obtaining information. Information can be obtained by a mixture of modern and traditional ways as well as formal and informal methods.

The Internet search engine is the most important frequent access tool for retrieval of information (77 percent), almost double the percentage of the second method the web link (36 percent) even though the web offers many possibilities, which before were not possible. By informal channels of obtaining and disseminating information, face-to-face communication, including chats with colleagues (22 percent). Relatively traditional resources, such as journals and books take the third position (34 percent) while attending conferences took the least position (7.5 percent). About 17.85 percent of subjects trace the information resource through references and citations.

Students at different educational levels consider Internet search engines as the most important channels for obtaining information. Compared to undergraduate students, more graduate and doctoral students obtain information through web links, data bases and international conferences. Library catalogue show a use of 29.5 percent of respondents.

## **Uses of the Cybercafé**

The use of the cybercafés vary from the point of view of number of users. The students use the Internet to complete research. They also write their homework and required papers on the computers. Among Internet services, e-mail has always been regarded as the most popular service (85 percent); the others are browsing the World wide Web (58.5 percent), the World Wide web being one of the most powerful search tool on the Internet and offers the largest reservoir of information in all forms (multimedia) in the world with over 21 million publicly accessible free pages of information (said to be growing at the rate of 51 percent per month; using search engines (51 percent) and down loading software (42.3 percent). Also the Internet services are used for searching for work/employment related activities. It is clear from this study that access to goods, services and information, to say nothing of employment and way of communicating, is increasingly dependent on ones ability to use information technology and the Internet.

## **Charges**

The charges for services at the cybercafés are uniform. They all charge one hundred Naira (N 100.00) an hour. For over night browsing which starts from 10.00p.m until 6.00a.m in the morning, they charge two hundred Naira (N 200.00). There are other incentives aimed at attracting customers. There are times when for every one hour spent in some of the cybercafés, one is given a bonus of an added thirty minutes.

## **Membership Schemes**

The cybercafés offer different types of membership schemes to attract customers. There is a scheme that gives preference to students on industrial attachment, yet another occasionally gives free tickets to fresh students to encourage them. Another of the scheme requires customers to pay the membership fee for a fixed period varying from one to three months and discount is offered for each hour of the use of the services. Some of the cybercafés charge less if one pays for certain number of hours.



## **Problems Facing Cybercafés**

In most of the cafés poor signal remains a service problem to their users despite the fact that most cafés open for 24 hours each day. Since there is erratic power supply, the cybercafé owners have to get generators to supply the power when there is electricity outage. Because of the erratic power supply, many of the systems in the cafés are easily damaged and it takes a lot of money to maintain the systems. Lastly, the Internet Service Providers (ISP) charge high prices for subscriptions.

## **The Future of Cybercafés**

Cybercafés attract a wide range of inexperienced computer and Internet users. They reach out to people not yet fully competent with the new technology. The mixture of experienced and inexperienced users may create a novel environment in which people can develop their skills. Easy access to e-mail has become a necessity today so people will patronize cybercafés. Since e-mail is the commonest easiest, and the most effective way of receiving information across the globe, the general opinion of staff, students, and cybercafé owners is that the Internet offers a lot of information and communication which the modern society requires. Therefore they believe that cybercafés will survive for a long time. The cybercafés contribute immensely to the university's educational goals, since the web with its rich data help the learners and researchers with cognitive tasks. The web amplifies and augments human cognitive abilities.

## **Sustainability**

The findings suggest that cybercafés have potential for sustainability on account of their educational, social and economic utility and their capacity to respond to the ICT needs of the university community. Services provided by the cybercafés are greatly appreciated by the community members. The cybercafés fit in to the university's ICT goals and plans. In fact most cybercafés use the university ISP services.

## **Relevance**

The main reason for using cybercafés is to obtain or send information. Some of the information sought are for professional, educational and economic motives.

Users express satisfaction with the services offered pointing out that cybercafés have opened them to wider audiences, facilitated external communication and promoted knowledge of computer technology among community members. The cybercafés will remain relevant in the university environment, even when the university library extends Internet services to its users.

## **Technological Environment**

The greatest threat to cybercafé sustainability is technical and technological. There is generally poor telecommunications infrastructure; the overall state of infrastructure continues to be a source of great concern, particularly with regard to unreliable electricity supply.

## **Impediments to Use**

## **Cost of Services**

Users express concern about fees charged for services. The high cost of services in relation to user incomes and earnings was identified as a serious barrier for women, the unemployed, students and poor community members.

## **Inadequate Physical Facilities**

Usually the available space was either too small or poorly managed with little privacy for users. Most cybercafés operate from premises that have been converted from other uses.

## **Cost of Equipment, Maintenance and Supplier**

The high cost of equipment, supplies and maintenance, e.g., computers, electricity, software licenses and cartridges for inkjet printers and the practice of getting technicians for either routine maintenance or repairs is a constant heavy burden to carry which affect use. The costs are usually reflected in service charges.

## **Poor Management**

Most cybercafés experience management problems, ranging from poor attitudes, to weak management, technical, and even social skills. The quality and number of staff is inadequate and sometimes marked by the use of poorly trained staff with weak remuneration.

## **Summary**

The study has shown that the university community use cybercafé services in their daily lives to satisfy their educational, social and economic needs, such as to send and receive message and seek information. The educational and social impacts of the cybercafés are significant. People are now conscious of the cybercafé as a means of educational, social and business communication, and this has reduced reliance on the transportation, as virtual mobility has become a reality. These new technologies provide access without social discrimination or marginalisation. The cybercafés have enhanced local job opportunities and the acquisition of new skills.

## **Conclusion**

The barriers to the use of information and communication technologies, which are predicated on constraining factor such as illiteracy, gender, and age, can disappear with time. These will give way to reasonable investments in models that encourage genuine community participation and capacity development. Also, cybercafés offer educational, social, economic, and cultural advantages and the great enthusiasm for them is proof that they stand some chance of surviving and growing. Lastly, it is possible in contemporary society for disadvantaged individuals and community-based organizations to have access to valuable information in real time at affordable rates through the use of new information and communication societies.

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