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Accessing Academic Library Services by Distance Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to investigate the accessibility of academic library services to distance learners, with specific reference to University of Ghana Library System (UGLS). A survey was conducted and one hundred and thirty eight (138) Level 400 distance learning students. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) is used to analyze the completed questionnaire.

The results revealed that a greater proportion of the respondents were not aware of the library services because they were not available on the UGLS. Distance learners had no remote access to library electronic resources and other databases and therefore did not strongly agree to the provision of information needs through social media services. It was also evident that information needs of respondents were mostly not adequately provided for. The study recommended the following to the management of UGLS; awareness creation of library resources, user education on information literacy of library resources, encouraging the use of social media platforms, training/user education and initiation of borrowing of library resources.

Keywords: Academic library services, distance learners, information needs, technology, accessibility, awareness of library services

1.1 Background to the Study

The technological revolution brought about by the internet permeates most tertiary institutions and propels the concept of online education in developed and developing countries (Grandi, 2003). Education plays a significant role in shaping developing nations. One of the most essential support systems influencing the quality of education offered is the provision of library and information services and resources. Watson (2003) reports that, “DE has revolutionized and democratized the delivery and accessibility of education and has also changed how critical support services, such as library and information service are provided by libraries”.

There is the need to put in place learning support services to aid significantly the distance educational curricula. Among the many learning support services, Cox (2004) underscored that library services always played a major role in expanding distance learning programs in higher learning institutions. Just as library systems provide services to regular students; it is the task of the university libraries to equally make available equal services to distance learners. Significantly, students from main stream benefit from library services such as borrowing library documentary, locate materials using OPAC, search information using research and knowledge commons facilities. Other services include photocopying services, reference services and bibliographic searches (Cann, 2009; Association of College and Research Libraries - ACRL, 2008).

Taking a cue from the above, the ACRL (2008) identifies that “every student, faculty member, administrator, staff member or any other member, or any other member of an institution of higher education, is entitled to the library services and resources of that institution, including direct communication with the appropriate library personnel, regardless of where enrolled or where located in affiliation with the institution. Academic libraries must, therefore, meet the information and research needs of all these constituents, wherever they may be. This principle of access entitlement, as applied to individuals at a distance, is the undergirding and uncompromising conviction of the Standards for Distance Learning Library Services”.

In Europe and Africa, DE has had an effect not only on the discipline of education, but has fundamentally affected library services that support it (Watson, 2006). Mabawonku (2004) posits that an academic library is the centre of operations of any higher learning institution at the same time as promoting the skill of reading/research, inquiry and independent thinking through the provision of resources to support teaching and learning activities. It mostly houses information equipment in a variety of formats such as electronic information sources like CD-ROM, the internet, etc. Library services are essential support services to DE students. Caspers et al. (2001) concurs that distance learning are in agreement that library support is a key element.

Niemi, Ehrhard and Neeley (2008) posit that the library requirements of distant learners are not exceptional; they have similar library and information needs as regular students, but in contrast Rowland and Rubbert (2001) reported that the university libraries did not provide for the specific information needs of distance students. Apart from the manner in which library services are accessed, requested and delivered, the same library resources are required, the same questions are asked, and the same quality of service is expected (Rodrigues, 1996); and they expect the same level of library service as that provided to their peers on campus (Riggs, 1997). Though successful direct access is regarded as by flexibility, reliability, availability, user-friendly, portability, efficiency and service ability (Sacchanand, 2002), effective and appropriate services to distance learning communities may differ from, but must be equivalent to those services offered on a traditional campus (ACRL, 1998). This paper explores the promotion of equal access to library materials such as books to distance learners in the higher learning institution, with specific reference to the University of Ghana, Legon.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

- i. To evaluate the level of awareness of library services offered to distance learners.
- ii. To investigate the library services and programmes offered to distance learners.
- iii. To ascertain whether the information needs of distance learners are adequately provided for.

1.3 Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant relationship between the level of awareness and accessibility of those library services offered to distance learners.

H₁: There is a significant relationship between the level of awareness and accessibility of those library services offered to distance learners

1.4 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework adopted for this study is the Standards for Distance Learning Library Service developed by ACRL (2008). The framework is a concept which postulates that every higher learning institution must have a library for students, faculty members, staff and administrators of that institution. Students should be able to have the right to use resources and services of the library irrespective of their location.

The framework aligns most closely with the purpose of this study as compared to theories in DE. The constructs identified in the Philosophy of the Standards for the framework are as follows: Access, Support and Information literacy and these are relevant to the context of this study.

1.4.1 *Access for achievement of superior academic skills*

Effective and appropriate library services and resources must be made available to students of the distance learning community. ACRL (2008), defines distance learning community as all individuals (students, staff, faculty, researchers, administrators and institution) directly involved with academic courses and programs offered further than the main campus or in the absence of traditional campus. Library services provided to distance learning student should be practically the same as those available for students in traditional campus settings regardless of their location.

This implies that distance learning student of University of Ghana should be able to have access to library materials, library electronic resources and other database such as Emerald, JSTOR, and Science Direct among others. These would be essential for the attainment of higher academic skills in the university (ACRL, 2008)

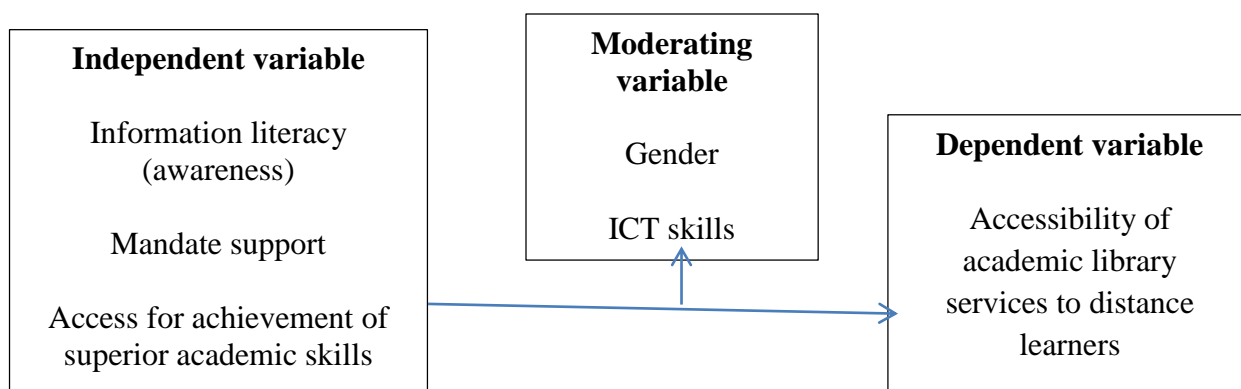
1.4.2 *Mandate support*

According to ACRL (2008), institutions must make available funds and appropriately meet up the information needs of its distance learning programs in order to support teaching, learning and research. This support must provide ready and corresponding library services and resources to distance learners. Tertiary institutions libraries and the librarian- administrator should conduct information need assessment on distance student to be able to know their information needs. This will help the library to provide adequate and appropriate information resource to satisfy their information need of distance learning students.

1.4.3 Information literacy

Libraries must provide information literacy programs such as user education and IT skills to the user learning community as stated by ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. According to information literacy standard for high education (2000), information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information. Boylston (2015), restate that Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning. This implies that distance learners of the UG should be given adequate information literacy skills in order to be able to locate, evaluate and use information effectively. Fig. 1, explains the above conceptual framework for this study.

Fig. 1: Conceptual framework



Source: Developed by Researchers

2.0 Literature Review

This section reviews literature on the concept of distance learning, library services in distance learning, characteristics of library support services and challenges in accessing library/formation resources.

2.1 Distance Learning

With the tremendous growth of online distance education programs, it is easily forgotten that the concept of learning “anytime anywhere” is not a new one. Distance learning, in form of correspondence or home study, reaches back over 250 years (Schmetzke, 2001). ‘Distance education or distance learning, is a mode of delivering education and instruction, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom’ (Sekyi, 2013). Distance learning has gone through massive changes since the advent of the personal computer and more recently the prevalence of the Internet.

The increased interest and involvement in distance learning in higher education institutions is being fueled by three major factors: i) institutions are looking to increase enrollment by attracting non-resident students; ii) there are growing needs of adult learners to acquire new skills and college credits while overcoming the constraints of time and distance; and iii) the development of new technologies are making the delivery of distance learning courses more attractive (Garrison and Shale, 2006).

Distance learning can take many different forms, ranging from mailed printed materials to desktop videoconferencing. A large number of past literatures discuss the different modes of distance learning and their effectiveness (Moore, 2009). As the focus of this study is not on examining the different delivery methods, but investigating the level of accessibility of library services for distance education.

It can be noticed that when the various definitions of distance education are examined, certain similarities arises:

- i. The partly detached situation of instructor/teacher and student throughout in the educational process;
- ii. The conscious efforts made by DE institutions in supporting teaching and learning at a distance;
- iii. The usage of technologically based interventions such as print, audio, video or computer in bridging the distance gap between teacher and student and thereby enhancing the educational process;
- iv. The facility of cooperative communication that helps students to interact more easily with teachers despite separation by distance usually via feedback on assignments etc.

2.2 Accessing library services in distance learning

Distance learners access library and educational resources and services in various ways (Sacchanand, 2002). Access can be direct e.g. face to face, or mediated by printed material, e.g. manuals, brochure or mediated by technology, using a variety of media such as telephone, radio, the Internet etc. Successful direct access is characterized by flexibility, reliability, availability, user-friendly, portability, efficiency and service ability (Sacchanand, 2002). Kavulya (2004) in his study of distance education in four universities in Kenya opined that some of the students have little or no exposure to library use and this affects their access to library resources. Effective and appropriate services to distance learning communities may differ from, but must be equivalent to those services offered on a traditional campus (ACRL, 1998).

According to Molefi (2008), library support services in distance learning are systems or procedures that are purposefully created and effectively utilised by a higher learning institution to support and or facilitate teaching and learning at a distance. Tong (1994) also regards support services as essential in helping students overcome difficulties that affect the quality of academic work. This gives students the confidence that they are not being left on their own but the institution is interested in their progress. Mirtz (2010) views student support as more overreaching involving the ‘entire setting in which learning takes place...the disciplines that provide the knowledge learning support, the learners and the arrangements made for them, the teaching and learning process, and the assessment of learning, institution and programs’.

Tait (2003) identifies three roles that support services in DE play: first, support services encourage the cognitive (learning) development of students; secondly, support enhances the self-esteem of students therefore building their confidence; thirdly, support for students is systematic in helping students meet the required standard expected of them so that they do not fall behind or redraw from school. Notwithstanding the above views, this study seeks to present library services as a student and learner support for DE students.

As Cullen (2004) stated librarianship has grown and changed in many aspects because of the different approaches that have to be taken to provide library and information services to those who learn at a distance. These changes have impacted not only on the delivery of library and information services to

those who learn at a distance but also on the delivery of library services to other clients. Thus, these changes have led to the development of new professional paradigms within the field of librarianship.

Generally, the emphasis in the literature on library services for distance learning has shifted dramatically in recent years from access to physical libraries and print materials to access to electronic libraries and electronic resources. Tait (2003) revealed that off-campus library services in London have been discussed. Among the findings included developing appropriate collections in various disciplines to meet the needs of the clientele of the libraries, providing reading, lending, reference, information and documentation facilities to all categories of staff and students; developing a special collection of distance education books and journals at the libraries, Circulation service including Inter Library Loan, Reference & Referral, User guidance, Bibliographies/Indexes, Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). Others included CD-ROM search, Microform search, Online Databases, Reprography and Lamination & Spiral binding (Tait, 2003).

2.3 Characteristics of Library Support Services

Library support services aid both students and faculty. As higher education expands its distance education offerings in Africa, the diversity of its student population increases (Bruso, 2001, p. 9). This inequity in skill level can create problems for higher learning institutions that desire to provide sound support services for students taking distance learning programmes. For instance, what kind of tutorials, should be developed to help students navigate distance learning curricula? Do distance learning students support services have the potential to be a great equalizer among students, or will they provide quality services only to those with access to the most current technology? This creates a problem for a successful distance learning programmes.

These are just two of the myriad questions and issues that must be explored by higher learning institutions hoping to effectively support distance learners. One of the distinct profile according to Seeman (2001) is that distance learners possess self-discipline and self-confidence and have the ability to work independently and overcome frustration and confusion. In addition, successful distance students must have access to required software and technological services. Yet providing access to technology for all students creates several challenges for higher learning institutions.

Higher learning institutions must also support faculty in creating learning environments and campus cultures that support the teaching of distance programmes. In European, successful distance learning institutions support faculty who, in effect, become both students and users of the technology tools they will use to deliver the courseware” (RDR Associates, 1998, p. 17). Positive integration of student and faculty support, as well as the use of effective technology, encourage meaningful interaction between students and library professionals, and can provide a successful model for effective teaching and learning that helps to ensure student success.

The importance of information and communication technology (ICT) to academic libraries has grown immensely. The online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) has revolutionised the manner and ease with which library users can search traditional library collections and CD-ROM and online sources of bibliographic and primary information have greatly widened the range of resources libraries offer their end-users (Slade, 2008). If equality of access is to be ensured between off- and on-campus students, strategies extending this service beyond the library walls must be developed and not be viewed simply as an additional service. The importance of remote access to OPACs is emphasised by Schiller (1996).

Another critical success factor, Yang (2005) suggests, will be the provision of timely, accurate and consistent information to remote users. It might be easiest to post information in some type of news

feature built into the OPAC". General and free access to academic library OPACs across the Internet is now very common, so in most cases all off-campus students require is a dialup connection to the Internet. However, provision of other library electronic resources such as CD-ROMs, online databases and electronic journals to remote users is much less straightforward, raising complex technical, legal and financial issues for libraries (Wright, 2009).

2.4 Challenges in accessing the information resources

In higher learning institutions, some challenges appear to hinder distance learners in accessing library resources and electronic resources. Among most studies (Tripathi and Jeevan, 2008; Mirza & Mahmood, 2012; Kwafoa et al., 2014), challenges identified include geographic barriers, technological barriers, budgetary and staffing restraints, lack of awareness for library resources and services, lack of information literacy, problem of interlibrary loan and document delivery and acquisition and collection development issues.

Geographic Barriers: The distance learners are dispersed along the length and breadth of the country. A study by Tripathi and Jeevan (2008) showed significant findings such as the inability of distance learners to access library resource. The study however recommended that to close the distance gap, stakeholders need to provide equitable information access to distance learners as close as par with campus based learners. In addition, Tripathi and Jeevan (2008) underscored distance learning libraries should concentrate on fulfilling the information needs and requirements of distance learners by exploring modern information technologies, developing library networks and negotiating with information providers to strike better learner friendly licensing and access models.

Another barrier is *technological barrier*. In DE, slow access to the Internet as a result of the bandwidth limitation or usage of old systems/technologies comprise of technological barrier. Especially in Africa, the bandwidth limitations of the internet make information resources difficult to be accessed by users. As stated by Barnhart & Stanfield (2011) technology has an essential role to play in enabling education to be accessed from anywhere and at any time, thereby helping to mitigate against the afore mentioned difficulties. A survey by Bryne & Bates (2009) corroborated the findings in the earlier study by stating that technological innovations would enable librarians to provide DLs with the same level of access to resources and services as on-campus students, as well as the knowledge necessary to find the information they need.

Lack of awareness for library resources and services appears to be a barrier to accessing library resources. Brooke (2011) revealed in his study in UK University (Sheffield Hallam University- SHU) that the Distance Learners at SHU had reasons for not using the library resources, among them are lack of awareness of the services offered.

Cohen & Burkhardt (2010) underscored that budgetary and staffing restraints are familiar to all libraries and librarians not just the ones who serve distance learners. It seems that libraries are constantly fighting stagnant or decreasing budgets. An empirical study by Whitehair (2010) supported the view of Cohen & Burkhardt (2010) that library services are expensive since it requires an addition of staff or revision to current services. For instance buying software, staffing electronic reference services, mailing books and articles are going to be added costs to the operational budget of the library. Thus, enough funds from stakeholders need to be provided for running efficient DE programme.

Delivery of material is often a complicated issue; it is an important part of providing equitable service to distance learners. It is another issue which requires lot of judicious planning and decision making. The distance learners who are remotely located may identify relevant library material that they need, but cannot obtain the full text online. The librarians have to decide what their policies and procedures will be

for request and delivery of, articles or books. The librarians have to decide how articles both owned and loaned through interlibrary loan must be sent- through-mail, fax or electronically. Delivery of books is often a trickier decision for a library. Copyright is a grave issue and what comprises infringement of copyright and fair use regarding electronic storage and transmission of print or images is still not crystal clear. Articles can be scanned and sent as images files to the distance learners. But copyright restrictions are a barrier to scanning and sending books.

3.0 Research Methodology

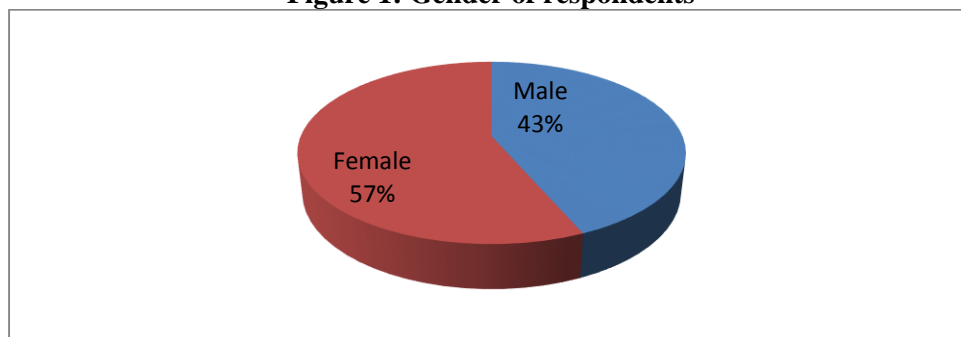
The paper adopted a quantitative methodology, but used the correlational research design as the framework because of its appropriateness in examining relationship between variables. Keeping in view the nature of data, this approach best suits the study. One hundred and thirty eight (138) respondents were randomly selected from the Level 400 undergraduates of University of Ghana Distance programme (the School of Continuing and Distance Education, College of Education, University of Ghana) in the 2014/2015 academic year. As the topic selected is more diverted towards the information services field, the primary data collection was through the questionnaire. The reliability of data collected was tested through Cronbach's alpha values in measuring the biasness in observations. The value was 0.679. The Cronbach's alpha analyses of the variables employed in the instrument revealed that they were reliable since they were found to be above the .6 threshold prescribed by Sekaran (2005). The research is being conducted to ascertain the relationship between two variables; i. Level of awareness, information needs (Independent Variable) ii. Accessibility of library services (Dependent Variable).

Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation together with Pearson's product moment correlation were used to establish the relationships between level of awareness or demographic characteristics and accessibility of library services. Man whitney test was used to examine the differences in accessibility based on respondents' gender and accessibility of library services. In this study, analysis of primary data was done using SPSS tool at the 0.05 level of significance.

4.0 Results and discussion of findings

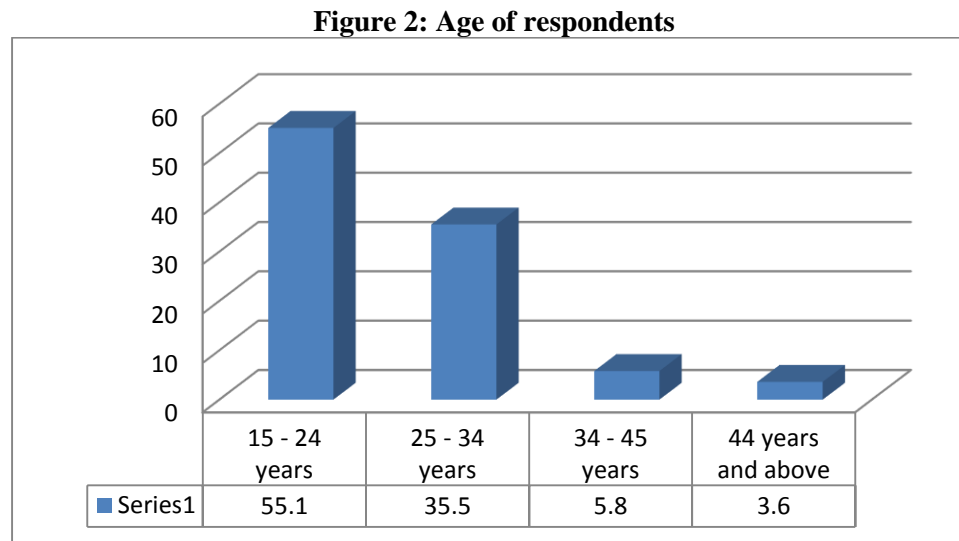
Figure 1 shows the results obtained for gender of respondents.

Figure 1: Gender of respondents



The study gathered data with regards to the gender of the respondents. From figure 1, the females constituted (57.0%) while males constituted (43.0%), indicating that the females outnumbered the males in this study.

Figure 2 captures the results obtained for age distribution.



Source: Field data, June, 2015.

The results obtained indicated that out of the total participants, more than half of respondents (55.1%) were within the age group of 15 to 24 years while a few of them, (3.6%) were 44 years and above. In conclusion, it can be said that majority of the respondents were within the ages of 15 - 24 years.

Table 1 shows the results the awareness and availability of library services and programmes to distance learners.

Table 1: Awareness and Availability of library services and programmes

Responses	Awareness of library services	Availability of library services and programmes
Yes	58 (42.0%)	20 (14.5%)
No	63 (45.7%)	69 (50.0%)
Not sure	17 (12.3%)	49 (35.5%)
Total	138 (100.0%)	138 (100.0%)

Source: Field data, June, 2015.

Results show that about half of the respondents 63 (45.7%) and 69 (50.0%), indicated “No” to the awareness and availability of library services and programmes in the Institute of Continuing and Distance Education (UG, Legon) respectively. This is a clear that a greater proportion of the respondents were not aware of the library services and programmes because they were not available from the UGLS to distance learners.

Data on the extent of availability of library services and programmes in the Institute of Continuing and Distance Education (Table 2) was found.

In Table 2, less than half of the respondents 57 (41.3%) indicated that library services and programmes were not available in the Institute of Continuing and Distance Education while a few of them 1 (0.7%) stated otherwise thus, highly available. On this note, it appears that library services and programmes were inadequate in the Institute of Continuing and Distance Education according to respondents.

Table 2: Extent of availability of library services and programmes

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Not available	57	41.3
Inadequate	54	39.1
Neutral /not sure	22	15.9
Available	4	2.9
Highly available	1	.7
Total	138	100.0

Source: Field data, June, 2015.

Table 3 shows the level of IT or computer knowledge by distance learners.

Table 3: Level of IT or computer knowledge

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Novice	21	15.2
Intermediate	100	72.5
Advance	17	12.3
Total	138	100.0

Source: Field data, June, 2015.

In Table 3, more than half 100 (72.5%) of distance learners were at the intermediate level while a few (12.3%) were at the advanced stage. This shows that most of the respondents were equip in IT or computer knowledge and therefore a start point to access the library resources electronically.

The relationship between the availability of library services and the ability of students to access these library e-resources and other databases was tested using Pearson Chi-Square.

Table 4: Availability of library services * Remote access to library e-resources

		Remote access to library e-resources			Total
		Yes	No	Don't know	
Availability of library services	Yes	4	16	0	20
	No	9	59	1	69
	Not sure	8	38	3	49
Total		21	113	4	138

$$X^2 = 3.623a, df = 4, p = 0.459$$

The Chi-square value for the availability of library services and programmes and remote access to library e-resources and other databases is $X^2(4) = 3.623a$ with an associated p-value of 0.459. The result provides no evidence of association between the availability of library services and programmes and remote access to library e-resources and other databases. It is thus evident that, respondents did not have remote access to the library e-resources and other databases because library services and programmes were not available for distance learners.

In order to identify the various library resources available to distance students, it was a need to ascertain the information needs of students. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 5.

It could be concluded from the value of means generated that, ‘OPAC to assist students access library collections’ scored the highest mean of (3.29) per respondent among other factors. However, the statement ‘social media (networking) services - an online service, platform, or site used to communicate with library users (Facebook, twitter)’ was rated the lowest with a mean score of 2.32. Thus, respondents did not strongly agree to the provision of their information needs through social media services.

Table 5: Provision of information needs

Questionnaire item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
Social media (networking) services - an online service, platform, or site used to communicate with library users (Facebook, twitter)	2.34	1.290	7
Virtual reference services - using request forms to make research queries either in print or electronic from the UGLS	2.55	1.296	5
Access to online or computerized system (OPAC) to assist students access library collections	3.30	1.374	1
Consultation services through email, toll-free telephone services.....	2.94	1.556	3
Access to inter-library loan services such texts supplementary reading and reference services	2.51	1.416	6
Online user education services - Library orientation programme available through e-mail, Weblog, e-bulletin boards, e-lectures, e-seminars e-workshops, etc.	2.70	1.321	4
Document delivery service (DDS) - ICT - based document delivery of documents in digitalized format through the electronic mail.	2.97	1.474	2

Source: Field data, June, 2015

To better provide satisfactory library services, distance learners gave their opinions on adequacy in satisfying information needs. Respondents were required to assess the adequacy in the provision of their information needs (Table 6).

Results shows that the information needs of respondents were mostly not provided for adequately (41.3%). On the contrary, only (1.4%), indicated that their information needs were absolutely provided for. This is a clear indication that the information needs of respondents were mostly not provided for adequately as evident in the results for the category of respondents for Absolutely no (30.4%) and mostly no (41.3%).

Table 6: Adequate provision of information needs

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Absolutely no	42	30.4
Mostly no	57	41.3
Neither yes nor no	15	10.9
Mostly yes	22	15.9
Absolutely yes	2	1.4
Total	138	100.0

Source: Field data, June, 2015.

The respondents ranked the challenges faced in accessing library services. The means and standard Deviations are presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Challenges of Accessibility of academic library services

Questionnaire item	Mean	St. Deviation	Rank
Geographical isolation	3.196	1.498	5
Internet connectivity	3.168	1.287	6
Library and Computer Training	3.5652	1.100	1
IT tools such as computer, IPads, Tablets ...	3.4565	1.388	2
Obtaining study materials	3.3261	1.329	3
Borrowing library books	3.1449	1.438	7
Inability to interact with library staff	3.2061	1.357	4

Source: Field data, June, 2015

It could be concluded from the value of means generated that, ‘Library and Computer Training’ scored the highest mean of (3.56) per respondent as against other factors. On the contrary, the statement ‘Borrowing library books’ was rated lowest with a mean score of 3.14. Thus, respondents strongly agreed that borrowing library books was a challenge faced by the distance learners in accessing library services at the UGLS.

Testing hypothesis

Table 8: Correlation matrix

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Accessibility to library resources	-					
2	Age of distance learner	-.081	-				
3	Awareness of library services	.540**	.138	-			
4	Information needs	.190*	-.223**	-.080	-		
5	IT or computer knowledge	.376	-.067	-.147	.009	-	
6	Gender of distance learner	.058	-.003	.078	.034	-.594**	-

Notes: $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.01$.

Finally a significant positive relationship ($r=.540$, $p<0.01$) was found between level of awareness and accessibility of library services offered to distance learners. On the whole it can be said that, creating awareness programmes have a significant positive use and accessibility of the library resources. These findings rejects the null hypothesis (H_0) which states that: *There is no significant relationship between the level of awareness and accessibility of those library services offered to distance learners*”

4.0 Conclusion and implication for librarians

It is concluded that library orientation organized by the UGLS for distance learners affected the awareness and use of library services. The effect of challenge is that distance learners who enroll on distance program may under-utilized the library resources. Moreover, geographical isolation was identified as a major barrier to distance students. In addition, obtaining study materials and borrowing library materials, distance students are unable to interact with library staff/personnel as against the regular students. This may lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity and lack of confidence on the part of

distance learners. It is against this background that the researcher explored the level of accessibility of academic library services to distance learners. In conclusion, it is established that geographical isolation is really leading to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity of library resources to the distance learners.

Indeed the present situation poses an implication for libraries, librarians and the university management as a whole. For instance, to academic institutions, library and information services must be accessible to DE students, since this helps in bringing out quality students. Since the students of DE are remotely located and geographically dispersed with uneven technology penetration; the challenge lies in academic libraries and students using appropriate information technology tool which appears uncommonly available and uneconomical. This is why earlier studies (Hensley & Miller, 2010; Whitehair, 2010) have suggested that the perception of librarians that isolation is a significant challenge for DLs is correct and strategies to overcome this are needed. Librarians must embed and adopt the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), such as discussion boards and other innovative technologies. It is critical to note that though this cannot entirely support information literacy training, but to some extent, remove the sense of isolation felt by DL.

Academic librarians must endeavor to implement comprehensive information literacy programmes to overcome the challenge of awareness of library services. As put by Abubakar (2010) information literacy is the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use library information. Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand. This is a call on librarians to prepare distance students for lifelong learning to equip distance learners to access the online resources; so the information resources remain not under-utilized but rather fully utilized.

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