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Information Need of Distance Learners in Nigeria

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Abstract

Information is a resource used to increase knowledge and usable for the intended purpose. Its need is a global widespread essential feature of production, consumption and exchange of human mental creativity across the globe. Having discovered that information support services are part of services in institutions that add to the value and quality of learning regardless of the mode of delivery, the information needs of distance learners deserve to be met, irrespective of where they are located. It is in this respect that paper seeks to examine the information needs of distance learners, the concept of distance learning and its learners. The other aspect of this paper is the channels and, or sources of information through which the information needs of distance (remote) learners are met. Some of the sources or channels considered are the library, modules/study guides, lecturers or tutors, interaction with peers, friends/colleagues and telecommunication. The paper examines literature both in Nigeria and other African countries, as well as what is available in Africa.

Keywords: *distance learning, distance learner, information needs, information source*

Introduction

Across the globe, institutions of higher education, business, and the military use distance education for education and training, likewise in Nigeria, thousands of students have enrolled in courses by colleges and universities around the country. Federal government institutions deliver a wide range of online and distance education programs. Examples of institution that offer online and distance education programs in Nigeria are the National Open University of Nigeria, University Of Lagos, and University Of Ibadan and the University of Ado-Ekiti .

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), was established in July, 1983, by an Act of the National Assembly as the first distance learning tertiary institution in Nigeria when it became crystal clear to the then Federal Government that the ever growing demand for education by her people cannot be met by the traditional means of face-to-face classroom instructional delivery. The institution was closed down few weeks after its establishment and the Act that established the University was suspended in 1984

by the then Federal Military Government that overthrew the civilian government. Many years after the closure, the compelling reasons that informed the earlier establishment of the university as well as the need to fill the gap created by the Federal Government clamped down on mushroom outreach study centres of many conventional universities all over the country and the need to take advantage of emerging developments in the field of ICTs which have revolutionized the techniques and methods of instructional deliveries in the distance learning mode necessitated the reactivation of the suspended NOUN Act of 1983 in 2002. This paved the way for the resuscitation of the NOUN (Ajadi, Salawu and Adeoye, 2008). The National Open University of Nigeria has her learners across country and has study centres across the country .

The University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre (DLC) which has been in existence since 1988. 28 years ago though, the University of Ibadan happens to be Nigeria's first university, established in 1948. The University of Ado-Ekiti started her own distance learning programme in the late 1990s. The University of Ibadan distance learning programme is housed within the university campus having all her programmes within the campus. University of Ado-Ekiti has her distance learners almost everywhere in south western Nigeria and holds study centres at any available space across the country.

These institutions offer complete degree programmes from a distance .People that earn degrees from these institutions through distance education are referred to as distance learners. Considering the peculiarity of mode of learning, they would need a lot of information from application for admission to registration till the end of their program; as such their needs should be met.

The objective of this paper is to find out the needs of distance learners in Nigeria. For this reason this paper will explain the concept of distance learning, concept of distance learners, information needs of distance learners, sources of information for distance learners and challenges they may encounter in seeking for these information.

Concept of distance learning and distance learners

Distance learning has been defined in so many forms, (Merill) 2003 defined distance learning as "Any formal instructional approach in which the majority of the instruction occurs at a distance". (Kibirge 2000) added that Distance learning is a formalised learning received by students whose location is out/ far from the learning

environment. Distance education is a method of education in which the learner is physically separate from the teacher. It may be used on its own, or in conjunction with other forms of education, including face-to-face interaction. In distance education, learners are physically separated from the institution that sponsors the instruction. Initially, distance learning institutions were created for workers that need to upgrade their educational qualifications for increased knowledge. There are also some distance learners who are drop out or have the inability to cope or even terminated their studies earlier in life and now want to continue, they thereby enrol in distance education programme. Distance education centres are usually universities, polytechnic or colleges of education.

Distance learning is of high benefit to students because they could learn from thousands of miles away and they could still work full time. National Extension Commission (2016) also shared in the same view that “distance learning is a method of learning that doesn’t require you to attend classes, stick to timetables and meet deadlines. It’s a flexible type of learning, using a combination of different methods to deliver education without requiring you to go to a school or college” (para. 1). Instead you study at home, or at work, in your own time. Some people have a regular time they devote to studying; others just work whenever they have a spare hour or two. Distance learning allows you to take control of your learning, working at a pace you’re comfortable with and not being bound to deadlines.

Jegede, (2003) defined distance education as education provided by a mode other than the conventional face-to-face method whose goals are similar to and just as noble and practical as those of on-campus full time face-to-face education. Distance education is defined as: institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors. Mabawonku(2004) explained that one of the biggest role distance learning plays is to provide flexible ,lifelong learning of lifelong value, it also gives an advantage over conventional by giving students freedom from rigidity and restrictions .This reduces scheduling conflicts and therefore increases options and opportunities to individual learners (Oladiran & Ogunleye,2014) .

Distance learners have different characteristics from conventional students, they are usually adult, matured, employed and responsible (Ayorinde, 2001). Distance learners

are independent learners, they study on their own, prepare for exams on their own, that makes them self-directed and self-motivated. As such their independence makes them have needs of some types of information.

Information need of Distance Learners

Needs “refers to required elements for students to achieve an educational objective” (Hawkins & Baker, 2005, p. 470). Information has become a critical factor for all sectors in the world, organisations and individual use information as a basis for competition (Babalola, Sodipe , Haliso, & Odunlade, 2012). Distance learners are not left out as categories of those that need information. Thus distance learners depend on information through online communication to be in contact with lecturers; nevertheless, distance learners still experience information poverty despite the supposed availability of information. Ayorinde (2001) classified distance learners based on certain characteristics and certain categories such as age range or those who study on part-time.

Information needs have been defined in different ways. According to Ehikhamenor (1990), information need is defined as an extent to which information solves problems as well as the degree to which there is an expressed satisfaction or dissatisfaction of information. Lin (2000), described information needs as the necessity of what an individual ought to have for his work, research or education. It is a piece of information recorded or not recorded, which an individual or member of a group requires for effective functioning in their daily activities.

Chin-Chih and HERNON (1982) are of the opinion that information need arises when persons find themselves in a situation that requires knowledge to deal with such situation as they deem fit. Information needs are influenced by factors such as range of information available, the intended purpose for the information, background, motivation and the individual characteristics of the users (Wilson, 2000). Other factors according to Nwagwu and Oshiname (2009), are the socio-political, economic, legal and regulatory factors guarding the use and users of information.

Nicholas (2002) cited in Wasike and Munene(2012) explained the essential need for distance learners, he said they need information for the following five broad functions.

- i) Fact finding function, which provides an answer to specific questions.
- ii) Current awareness functions, which keeps the information up to date

- iii) Research function, which investigates a new field in-depth
- iv) Briefing function, which obtains a background understanding of issues
- v) Stimulus functions, which provides ideas to obtain stimulus (Nicholas, 2000).

Jagannathan (1998) categorised the information requirements of distance learners as follows:

“Need for materials and facilities: Distance learners need several kinds of materials such as reference books, texts books, journals, reports, Self-Instructional Materials (SIMs) etc. They require various facilities, viz. library reading room as well as stack room space with proper display of documents.

Need for information services: such as bibliographic instruction for print and non-print materials; information about distance learning agencies, and support services.

Need for user services: Distance learners also need professional guidance and support from the library staff about using library collection, using equipment and facilities available at the library”. (p. 140)

Singh (2002) also argues the general needs of distance learners include information services, loans of specific book/reference book, journal articles, photocopy of previous examination papers for their course, information material on a particular subject, self-instructional materials either audio or video form and having access to different library collection and facilities available.

Furthermore, Boadi and Letsolo (2004) investigated the information needs and seeking behaviour of distance students at the Extra- Mural Studies in Lesotho. The study revealed that course materials seemed to be popular with the distance students and the expectation of the students was that more course materials would be produced by the Institution. However, in Nigeria, distance learners depend a lot on course material produced by the institution involved.

In another study conducted by Adesoye and Amusa (2011), found that though distance students were aware and make use of the institutional libraries to meet their information needs, there were, however, impediments to the students utilization of library and information resources. These impediments among others were inadequate library facilities, lack of time due to the intensive nature of their program and reliance on study materials.

From a document that details establishing and managing distance librarianship, the Commonwealth of Learning (Oladokun, 2002)also notes that the basic information services distance learners need are access to information resources, such as texts,

supplementary reading and reference services; learning how to find the information they need from the information that is available and developing ways to apply the information for the intended purpose and to make sound, information-based decisions.

Information Sources Used By Distance Learning Students

Oladokun(2014) defined Information sources or channels as “the means used to transfer information to a target population or audience”. As earlier observed, information sources/channels constitute one of the major components of information environment”. For distance learners to have access to the needed information, some common and relevant sources they would need are: Telecommunication, colleagues, lecturers, internet and the library. Oladiran and Ogunleye (2014) agreed to these in their study on Information Needs and Seeking Behaviour of Distance Learning Students of University of Lagos, Nigeria, they found out that the relevant information sources distance learners sought were from friends/neighbours, lecturers, newspapers/magazines, CD-ROM, databases, TV/Radio, and library and the Internet .

Larson and Owusu - Acheaw(2016) reported from a study that the most common sources used to obtain information is the course material, lecture notes, information from colleagues. They also said that very few distance learners depend on library and the Internet and that distance learners preferred print format to electronic format. This in essence means that the use of telecommunication is an information resource to distance learners. Telecommunication involves the use of radio/TV to broadcast lecture notes, important information and used solely for educational purposes. An example of a distance learning institution that uses telecommunication for educational purpose in Nigeria is the National Open University of Nigeria. They have a radio FM running on 101.9 fm. through this media; a lot of distance learners can be reached. Other African countries also make use of telecommunication, for example in Botswana and Ghana (Jegede, 2003; Siabi-Mensah, 2000).

The advent of social media has encouraged communication amongst students. Even in non-conventional system, apart from instant messaging apps like the Facebook, whatsapp, the occasional meetings of students often allow them to exchange ideas and information. As a matter of fact, students are therefore never discouraged and tired from having discussions and this way ideas and information are shared According to the report on the Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources by OCLC (2005) “friends” are identified as the principal source for information. The report discovered that students use

instant messaging like whatsapp and Facebook instant messaging apps to communicate with one another. Communication among colleagues is a very popular form of information sharing and ideas sharing amongst students.

Another very important source that distance learners can make use of is the library. The library is provider of information in all forms and types. (COL, 2003) states that libraries and librarians are as important to distance learning as they are to face-to-face education. They further emphasizes that librarians need to understand the mechanics and concepts of distance education to provide effective distance library service to its learners. The library serves as a tool of excellence and in the promotion of life long learning by the provision of learning environment which integrates reading places, information technology and materials for study and research. Distance learning librarians must therefore keep abreast of changing technology to help them deliver effective and fast delivery services to its users.

Challenges Encountered By Distance Learning Students In Their Information.

The challenges encountered by distance learning students in the quest of seeking information ranged from; “information sources being not readily available, information sources are not easily accessible, library staffs are not accommodating, information is sometimes not timely, difficulty in using the library catalogue, inadequate search skills, mutilation and stealing of library materials has deprived my access to information needs, information is not relevant to my needs, problem of wrong shelving of library materials on the shelves, problem of searching for and retrieving information materials online in the library, library is far, high cost of use of the Internet”(Oladiran and Ogunleye, p. 122).

Another challenge of information needs of distance learners is the negative disposition of distance learners and poor information literacy (Gwang, 2011). He further explained that the ways in which distance learners portrays poor information literacy include: lack of awareness of information needs, lack of awareness of information systems, lack of knowledge or skills to exploit the information systems, inability to evaluate accurately the information at hand (**Thanuskodi, 2012**).

Larson and Owusu- Acheaw (2016) agreed by reporting a study conducted that distance learners lack library skills needed to enable them acquire information in satisfying their information needs. He reported again that the users also lacked computing skills to enable them utilize information technology – based library sources and facilities.

Conclusion and recommendation

The success and survival of distance learner depend a lot on their access to information, how well provided are the information and they are able to meet need of distance learners. From the paper, the information needs of distance learners have been identified which include, course materials, past examination paper for their courses and sources to satisfy this needs are through media, colleagues, libraries, and lecturers.

The following are thereby recommended:

1. When distance learners first register they should be sent an information pack that contains details on their offer of admission and how to seek for the needed information. Such information should also be on the web pages of the corresponding institutions for those that have are information literate.
2. Libraries can also help in providing information to distance learners by incorporating information through the library links on the institutions web page.
3. Academic in the institutions should perform research on how satisfied heir learners are, how to reach more of their learners so that distance learners can have improved service in meeting their information needs.
4. Since it has been recognised that distance learners satisfy their need through telecommunication, colleagues and libraries among a host of others, distance learning institutions can create a messaging app for students for the sole purpose of communicating with one another, this could also be linked with the lecturers so that proper information can be passed among distance learners.

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