



LEARNER SUPPORT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN SUPPORTING TEACHING AND LEARNING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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Abstract

This study examined the nature of services and facilities available and accessible in public libraries to ODL students in sub-Saharan Africa and the challenges these services face. Library services are central in teaching and learning processes because they expose the students to a variety of resources which facilitate in-depth study and lead to development of intended competencies. However, according to Pernell (2002), traditional library services often fail to adapt to the needs of Open and Distance Learning students especially in dual mode universities. This in the end affects students' final grades as well as the quality of education they receive. Using a cross sectional survey, from 422 respondents who include students, staff (both on campus and off campus) and librarians, data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and documentary analysis. The findings reveal that due to inadequate library resources in study centres where ODL students are meant to receive remote support, the students have been utilizing library resources from the public libraries. This support from public libraries however needs to be acknowledged and fully integrated in the University policy provision for effective collaboration and knowledge sharing to ensure smooth coordination of library activities. This paper seeks to examine the potential of public libraries in supporting distance learners in Makerere University and the need for policy to guide the collaborations and while sharing library resources.

Introduction

In Open and Distance Learning (ODL), the majority of educational communication between teacher(s) and student(s) occurs non-contiguously (at different times and in separate places) (Perraton, 1993). This separation is what Moore (1993) calls transactional distance. According to him "it is the physical separation that leads to a psychological and communication gap, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of the instructor and those of the learner". This distance is determined by the amount of dialogue which occurs between the learner and the instructor and the amount of structure which exists in the design of the distance learning course. To close the communication gap, Moore (1993) proposed three models of interaction essential in ODL. First is the Learner-Teacher Interaction model, which provides motivation, feedback and dialogue between the teacher and students. The Second is

Learner-Content interaction, where students obtain intellectual information from study materials. Third is the Learner-Learner interaction, which is the exchange of information, ideas and dialogue that occurs between and among students about their learning. Interaction at all levels is fundamental to the effectiveness of ODL programmes.

Student support services need to facilitate all three components while the learner is remote from the instructor. Tait (2000) defines student support services as a range of services for individual students and groups of students, including study materials, tutoring, library, counselling, study centres and elements of continuous and individualized correspondence teaching. Student support is universally identified as the most critical factor influencing effective teaching and learning in ODL programmes (Moore, 1996).

Although other research has examined the role of libraries in ODL, especially those on campuses (Mayende & Obura, 2013; Kawalya, 2010; Middleton, 2005; Watson, 2003; Brophy, 1992) there is little research on libraries off-campus and specifically the significance of public libraries in supporting ODL. Tipton (2008) contends that the constraints that motivate students to opt for ODL are the same ones that limit their ability to use a centrally, often urban-located, library. They are likely to be working full time, and have family commitments, in addition to their student responsibilities; these obligations influence their access to study materials, both in time and space (Aguti, 2003). They therefore rely on library services at remote sites, interlibrary loans or travel to the main campus. ODL institutions commonly try to open study centres near to the students to offer academic support, which will often include library services. Library requirements for distance learners are threefold: the need for materials, facilities, and information and user services (Jagannathan, 1989). Rather than being expected to go to the library whilst in ODL, the library should go to the students, and the strategies to “take” the information to the students need to be initiated and deployed.

In this particular study, we will examine the role of library services in supporting distance learners. With non-traditional study having rapidly become a major element in higher education, there is greater recognition of the need for library resources and services at locations other than main campuses and demand for equitable services for all students, no matter where the “classroom” may be (ACRL, 2008). ODL students are entitled to library services and resources equivalent to those provided to students in conventional systems. However, according to Stephens (1996), traditional library services often fail to adapt to the needs of ODL learners especially in dual universities. For instance, they fail to provide off-campus library services like region-wide borrowers’ cards and consortia membership between academic libraries. Parnell (2002) suggests that it may be unethical to offer a qualification to students without providing them with adequate resources for study. Hence, to protect the credibility of distance learning courses, adequate investment in library services is needed by university administrators, both on and off campus.

The role of public libraries in ODL in Uganda

At Makerere University, library services have traditionally been offered through a book bank system where core text books are acquired by University departments and study materials are produced specifically for distance learners. Library services therefore are offered through the departmental book bank at the main campus, in regional university study center libraries, and sometimes in public libraries. According to Mayende & Obura (2013), the department has an estimated collection of 350 titles of study materials, with 28,000 copies lent out to students on the main campus and in collaborating libraries. As much as the department has tried to take the services nearer to the students, complaints have consistently come from students regarding the inadequacy of library services upcountry. This is mainly because the good text books are in the main library at the main campus and therefore cannot be accessed easily by ODL students. The University has also subscribed to several online data bases but the ICT infrastructure is not available in the upcountry centres and therefore ODL students cannot access these resources (Mayende & Obura, 2013).

According to Bbuye (2010) and Mayende & Obura (2013), with the exception of the upgraded centres of Fort Portal and Jinja, ODL library services in upcountry study centres of Makerere University in Uganda are neither equipped with substantial collections nor provide students with appropriate services. Alongside poor Internet access, and inadequate or outdated study materials, students struggle to get relevant resources to complete assignments and many do examinations without supplementary reading, which consequently affects the quality of not only their grades but also the education they receive. Lack of access to library services and related instructional resources is perceived to be an obstacle to starting or expanding ODL programmes (Keith, 1998).

Given the above, many students have found support and assistance from public libraries across the country. According to Meredith (2010), public libraries have always supported distance learners as members of the community, being entitled to support like anyone else. According to UNESCO, a public library is the local centre of information, making resources (e.g. books, reference collections, computer and Internet access) accessible to the general public. In an effort to support ODL students, Makerere University has been collaborating with public libraries to offer library services. Libraries may also serve as remote sites for courses. Keith (1998) adds that public libraries are often critical to the development of ODL as they enhance teaching and learning processes. However, in Uganda, such support is not fully integrated in the University's provision, whereas better coordination may help secure effective student support. This paper therefore examines the place of public libraries in supporting distance learners in Makerere University, Uganda.

Some public libraries have proven more effective in supporting learners due to their consistent distribution across the country, and the extent of services and facilities they can provide. They have regular opening hours, including at the weekend, reading space, a variety of reading materials (including research reports, government documents and reference books)

and internet facilities which provide e-books and online resources. The Makerere University library collections are also accessible through its Online Catalogue which provides web-based access to a broad variety of electronic databases viewed as abstracts and full text. These however, are not accessible to most of the ODL students upcountry (Mayende & Obura, 2013). Meredith (2007) confirms that public libraries have always purchased data bases or journal subscriptions or reference books specifically with students' needs in mind. However, she contends that there is a limit to which public libraries can support university students without better collaboration between library and the university.

As noted earlier, ODL students are unique and have different needs which cannot fit within the existing university infrastructure and policies (ACRL, 2008). Therefore in ODL, modalities and strategies have to be devised by librarians, distance educators and administrators to take library services to the students (Watson, 2003). Borrowers' learning should not be inhibited by lending restrictions, and study materials should be provided in as many locations as possible (Aguti, 2003). Many institutions offering ODL collaborate with public libraries by linking students to their university libraries electronically and by providing deposit collections at public libraries remotely (Meredeth, 2007).

In this study, we examine the nature of support services offered by public libraries to Makerere University ODL students in Uganda. Our motives for such a study reflect a drive within the University to increase the quality of ODL education. That said, utilizing public libraries as facilitators to ODL may provide a way to support ODL across similar contexts, particularly in those where online access is low in rural communities. We focus in particular on the following research questions:

1. What is the nature and status of academic support services to ODL students offered by public libraries in Uganda?
2. What affects the utilization of study materials and other resources in public libraries in Uganda?

Methodology

The study employed a survey research design which used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data gathering and analysis. To try to make the study representative, data were collected in the four regions of Uganda (central, East, North and West). Four public libraries were visited – one from each region. These libraries were selected purposefully to match those areas with the greatest concentration of ODL students. Cluster sampling was used to select the 300 students out of 3500 on the B.Ed. programme offered through ODL in Makerere University. The clusters of B.Ed. students included 90 first years and 210 third year students who were asked to share their experiences regarding student-support, and specifically library services upcountry. Thirty key informants were also purposively selected to participate in the study. These included seven librarians, five lecturers, ten students and six members of staff from the ODL Department.

Information from respondents was gathered using a structured questionnaire, interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). FGDs were held in each of the public libraries visited and the purpose was to solicit in-depth information from a cross section of key informants. An observation check list was also employed to establish the actual facilities available to students. For purposes of triangulation, relevant documentary evidence was used to support and validate information obtained using other techniques. Interview and focus group dialogue was recorded, categorized and thematically coded in order to draw conclusions. Some numerical data were also analyzed with descriptive statistics.

Analysis of findings

In this section, the findings of the study are presented and discussed in relation to the research question.

Research Question One: What is the nature and status of academic support services to ODL students offered by public libraries in Uganda?

Students across Uganda were asked to indicate the services and facilities available in public libraries which they had used to facilitate their learning. Results show us that some students have been utilizing the services and facilities in the public libraries, especially the internet and online data bases (74%). They also benefited from technical staff (73%), reading space (63%) and study materials (42%). However, a large percentage said there are no study materials (58%) and supplementary reading materials (63%). Interviews with students who did not visit the library revealed that many students were not aware of the services and facilities available in the public libraries. These responses from students will be analyzed together with the observations and interviews carried out with the librarians and programme administrators in the following section.

Research Question Two: What affects the utilization of study materials and other resources in public libraries in Uganda?

To answer this question, observations and interviews with students, librarians and programme administrators were conducted to establish the determinants of library utilization. Some of the factors raised are discussed below.

Awareness

Analysis of the students' responses show that a good number of students are not aware of the existence of the public libraries and the services therein and therefore made minimal use of them. For example 58% of them did not know that study materials had been deposited in the public libraries and 63% had no idea that they obtain supplementary materials from the public libraries. This was very prominent in Northern and Eastern Uganda as librarians reported that the students had not visited the library in the last four years. This was mainly attributed to breakdown in communication among students, programme administrators and public libraries. The librarian in Fort Portal said; "We have resources here which can be utilized by

the ODL students but they do not come! The university should communicate to the students to come and utilize these facilities.”

There is therefore need to improve on communication to students about the existence of public libraries so they can be utilized to full potential by ODL students. Emphasis should be given to communicating with students through a variety of media, using available technologies like mobile phones, networks and systems to maintain contact with students (ODeL, 2010). The relationship with other stakeholders like librarians should be nurtured as well to ensure a smooth running of activities by partner institutions. Middleton (2005) observes that if such relationships are not well handled, collaborations can be hindered by factors like inflexible organizational management structures and narrow administrative vision (Middleton, 2005).

Presence of study materials

Results indicate that 42% of the students confirmed that ODL study materials were available in the public library, while 58% claimed they were absent. The quality of study materials available to the students is also important as ordinary text books may not facilitate learning in ODL. In other words, they should be in a self-study interactive format whether they are print-based or technology mediated. Use of ordinary books and articles may turn out to be counterproductive, as students claim they are difficult to comprehend without the guidance of the tutors. Essentially, the students prefer the study materials that have been specially prepared for their learning since they are easy to understand and have been prepared for that purpose. ACRL (2008) further advises that study materials should have sufficient quality, depth, number, scope, and currency to meet all students' needs in fulfilling course assignments, meet teaching and research needs, and facilitate the acquisition of lifelong learning skills.

In this respect, students were further asked to indicate multiple responses whether the study materials given to them had interactive features to facilitate learning. Here, students were asked to tick the option that best described their opinion. The findings revealed that the major characteristic of the learning materials was to provide examples (16%). The learning materials also contained statements of what students were to learn (15%), served as study guides (14%), and contained summaries (13%), among others. Usually, where study materials are not written in an ODL mode, the material should be accompanied by a study guide to facilitate learning. During the study, all the students interviewed (100%) reported that they are not given any study guides to accompany the study materials that are not especially developed for distance education students. In the absence of study guides, the students are left to use the study materials as they are and yet they are not interactive to facilitate learning.

In view of the challenges regarding the quality of study materials, programme administrators suggested the need for more facilitation to train tutors and writers in materials-development, so as to improve the quality.

Variety of study materials

The study found out that the reading materials in the public libraries were mainly developed print materials, as reported by 67% of first years and 76% of the third year students. There were no audio or video materials. The programme depends mainly on the print study materials which take the forms of text books, readers, study guides, handouts and extracts from various literature sources and specially designed materials, written in a style appropriate to distance learners (Aguti, 2004). There is a danger, however, in relying on only print materials because according to Bates (1994), print promotes accumulation of facts and information but not critical thinking. The programme administrators are therefore encouraged to use blended methods of teaching materials to enhance acquisition of the relevant competencies.

Availability of supplementary materials

The students (74%) who visited the public library also reported that the study materials deposited there are outdated and therefore not very helpful while doing their research. They however, applauded the library for providing a variety of references, from both the shelves and the internet, which they have utilized as supplementary references.

In this respect, the librarians requested that the university should send them up to date study materials to facilitate learning. Smith and Dunn (2001) emphasise the same when they observe that the currency and relevance of study materials in ODL was considered a positive factor because learning is immediately reinforced through application to real situations.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs)

New developments in ICT offer a lot to ODL in terms of information retrieval and access, interaction and collaboration. The internet broadens the scope of ODL by extending the time and location boundaries in which courses can be delivered (Moore & Lockee, 1999). All the public libraries visited had ICT facilities like computers and the internet, which could be utilized by students while doing their research and typing services. The librarians also reported that through the national library board, they have subscribed to some online data bases like EBCO, Emerald and some African journals which are accessible by their readers.

The students who had visited the library (74%) confirmed that they had access to IT facilities, including the internet. They appreciated electronic materials although they did not have access to the data bases the university subscribes to because there is no arrangement by the university to have them accessed through the public libraries. The students using the library did have access to these computers to do their in-depth research using online resources. However, Mayende and Obura, (2013) contend that with such infrastructure in place, electronic delivery of information materials from the main campus to the public libraries is possible, but only if the working relationship between library and university is streamlined. Without free provision of ICT services, students suffered from financial hardship, which could form a barrier to participation. One B.Ed student who was not aware of the library

services lamented: “We have been spending a lot of money in internet cafes to surf and do research when we could access the internet cheaply here!” This is a sign that the students are not well informed of the resources available to them at these public libraries.

Librarianship

The students (73%) and evidence from documentary analysis indicate that the public library had trained staff in the field of information science and competently served students. According to records from the Public libraries website, all public libraries are being manned by trained librarians. The study also established from the libraries visited that the officers in charge had at least a diploma or degree in library and information science. This was also seen from the way study materials deposited for students were well organized on the shelves, but staff lamented that only a few students had actually borrowed books. They also lamented the poor reading culture among the students; “Our students do not have a reading culture; even the available resources are not fully utilized” (Librarian from Fort Portal).

Qualified personnel are very important because they can ably assist students to source the references and journal articles from the data bases. In case of effective decentralization of library services including online materials, these staff can assist the students competently because of their familiarity with the software (Xingfu, 2000). In relation to academic support, the study found that public libraries had more knowledgeable staff than the centres. According to Mayende & Obura, (2013) public libraries have trained staff who can direct students how to access on line data bases, direct students to materials contained in general and research collections as well as resources referred to in reading lists. According to ACRL (2008), in some cases the collaborating institution must provide professional and support personnel with clearly defined responsibilities at the appropriate location(s) and in the number and qualifications necessary to attain the goals and objectives for library services to the distance learning program.

Reading space

The study found out that public libraries have ample reading space which ODL students utilized for their reading, with 63% of the students who have been visiting the public libraries reporting a conducive reading environment. Many of these students, as already noted, may not be able to read in their homes or where they work because of family or employment obligations. Many of them claim to do serious reading and studying only when they report for face to face tutorials at campus. One student said; “When am at home I don’t have time to read because from school I have to attend to my family chores and with children at home you cannot concentrate to read”.

Remoteness from the library

Accessibility to the public library is also a factor that can affect its utilization. This is mainly a problem because they are all located in the urban centres and some students find it difficult to reach them because of poor roads and poor transport. This was vividly clear with students in

Northern Uganda who were neither close to Gulu nor Lira centres, because they were coming from Apac. One B.Ed student from Apac said: “From my home to Lira town is about 85 miles and I use two taxis! I can only come to the public library only if I am sure the study material I need is there.”

Conclusions

The study established that over ten years ago, the university signed a memorandum of understanding with public libraries to deposit study materials in the libraries, to be accessed and utilized by ODL students. This arrangement has been effective in supporting ODL students because public libraries are widely spread across the country and almost all students can access them. Through this relationship, students have been able not only to access study materials but also get access to other services in the public library. These among others include reading space, computers, internet, and supplementary reading materials from the shelves and also online resources from the data bases they subscribe to. However, the study also found out that the study materials deposited in these libraries are outdated and no longer very helpful to the students. This could have been due to the fact that over time the working relationship between the two institutions has become weak, mainly due to failure to renew the contract, making it difficult for any further study materials deposits to be made at the public libraries.

Recommendations

- The University should renew the contract with public libraries so as to establish formal collaboration and facilitate smooth working relationships. Inter-library cooperation is not new in education and particularly in ODL. Morrisett and Baker (1993) contend that the back bone of ODL library services is embedded in cooperation of libraries at a local, national and international level.
- Up to date and relevant study materials should be deposited – preferably those written in an interactive manner.
- The university should give public libraries access to its data bases for ODL students to access wherever they are.
- Programme administrators should avail students with relevant and regular information about public libraries' locations and the services available.
- Through public libraries, the university could also work towards decentralizing electronic study materials so that students upcountry can access these resources.
- The University should increase the allocation of funds towards ODL activities as well as continue lobbying the development partners to support the revamping of library services for ODL students.
- The relevant and up to date study materials need to be developed for students and supplementary reading materials bought or adapted.
- ICT infrastructure is required up country to provide access to the Internet. Huge investment is required in developing study materials for distance learners.

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