Off-Campus Students and their Challenges: A Case of University of Zambia Library

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Abstract: This study investigated the challenges faced by off campus students in accessing library services at the university of Zambia library. A semi-structured questionnaire with both closed and open ended questions was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from a sample of 90 respondents. The results revealed that a greater proportion of the respondents were not aware of the library services available in the library. 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 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 to library management.

Keywords: Library services, Off campus students, Information needs, Technology, Accessibility, Awareness of library resources, Services.

Introduction

The university of Zambia was established in 1996 following the recommendation of the lockwood commission. When the university was opened in 1966, it had 310 full time students. Over time, the enrolment numbers have been increasing. This increase was on one hand in response to the country's need for human resource development at the time of political independence and on the other hand the demand for this level of education from people who had got into employment without university education. However, in the 1990's, the enrolment was reduced due to inadequate physical facilities and shortages in financial and human resources. To mitigate this reduction in enrolment figures, UNZA incorporated distance education as a means of providing wider access through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), to cater for those unable to participate in regular schemes of study. Distance education is now recognized all over the world as a mode of education, which helps large numbers of learners to access quality education. Through this mode, quality education is made accessible at very low costs to people whose work, family responsibilities or even personal preferences would bar them from attending college on a full time basis. It also provides opportunities to design flexible curricula for a wide spectrum of clientele who may take courses at their own time depending on their ability and convenience. However, without effective library resources and services to support distance learning, the outcomes of education may be compromised. The technological revolution brought about by the internet permeates most tertiary institutions and propels the concept of online education in developed and developing countries. 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 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 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. Taking a cue from the above, the ACRL 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. Mabawonku 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 concurs that distance learning are in agreement that library support is a key element 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 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 and they expect the same level of library service as that provided to their peers on campus. 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 Zambia library [1-6].

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

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework adopted for this study is the standards for distance learning library service developed by ACRL. 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.

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, 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.

Mandate support: According to ACRL, 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.

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, 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, 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 [7-12].

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 resources and services.

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. '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'. 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 enrolment 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. Independent variable Information literacy (awareness) mandate

support access for achievement of superior academic skills moderating variable gender ICT skills dependent variable accessibility of academic library services to distance learners 5 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. 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 arise: i. the partly detached situation of instructor/teacher and student throughout in the educational process; ii. The conscious efforts made by distance education 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.

Accessing library services in distance learning

Distance learners access library and educational resources and services in various ways. 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 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.

According to Molefi, 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. Mirtz 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 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. A study by Tait on librarianship revealed that this profession 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 [13-16].

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. 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. The findings of a study by Slade revealed that 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 revolutionized 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 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. Another critical success factor, Yang 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 7 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.

Challenges in accessing resources

In higher learning institutions, some challenges appear to hinder distance learners in accessing library resources and electronic resources. Among most studies, 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 off campus students are dispersed along the length and breadth of the country. A study by Tripathi and Jeevan 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 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 and Stanfield 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 and Bates 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 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 and Burkhardt 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 White hair supported the view of Cohen and Burkhardt 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 8 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.

Methodology

A semi-structured questionnaire with both closed and open ended questions was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from a sample of 90 respondents. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample. The results of the study were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate meaningful statistical inferences. The data was then presented in form of charts, and tables, with frequencies and rational representations in form of percentages.

Results and Discussion

Demographic characteristics of respondents

The gender distribution of the participants was 57% male and 43% female. This gender allotment probably reveals that there is a growing male dominance in distance education. With regard to age distribution, more than half of the 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. It can therefore be concluded that majority of the respondents were within the ages of 15-24 years (Table 1).

Table 1: Awareness and availability of library resources and services

Responses	Awareness of library services	Availability of library services and programmes
Yes	30 (33.3 %)	18 (20.0%)
No	45 (50.0%)	50 (55.5%)
Not sure	15 (16.7%)	22 (24.4%)
Total	90 (100.0%)	90(100.0%)
Source: Field data, Jan 2023		

The results show that about half of the respondents 45 (50.0%) and 50 (55.5%), indicated "no" to the awareness and availability of library resources and services in the library. This is a clear indication that a greater proportion of the respondents were not aware of the library resources

and services available in the university of Zambia library (Table 2).

Table 2: Extent of availability of library resources and services

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Not available	38	42.2
Inadequate	34	37.8
Neutral/not sure	10	11.1
Available	5	5.6
Highly available	3	3.3
Total	90	100
Source: Field data, Jan 2023		

In Table 2, less than half of the respondents 38 (42.2%) indicated that library resources and services were not available in the library while a few of them 3 (3.3%) stated otherwise thus, highly available. On this note, it appears that library resources and services were inadequate for distance learners according to the respondents (Table 3).

Table 3: Level of IT or computer knowledge

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Novice	14	15.6
Intermediate	65	72.2
Advance	11	12.2
Total	90	100
Source: Field data, Jan 2023		

In terms of the level of IT or computer knowledge by distance learners, Table 3, shows that more than half 65 (72.2%) of distance learners were at the intermediate level while a few (12.2%) were at the advanced stage. This shows that most of the respondents were equipped in IT or computer knowledge and therefore a start point to access the library resources electronically (Table 4).

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 resources and services	Yes	3	10	0	13
	No	7	32	1	40
	Not sure	6	25	3	34
Total		16	70	4	90
Source: Field data, Jan 2023					

The results in Table 4 provide no evidence of association between the availability of library resources and services and remote access to library e-resources. It is thus evident that, respondents did not have remote access to the library e-resources and other databases because library resources and services were not available for distance learners (Table 5) [17-19].

Table 5: Information needs of distance learners

Effect of provision of information need	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. Social media (networking) platform, or site used to communicate with library users (Facebook, twitter)	11	12.2	14	15.5	42	46.6	23	25.5
2. Virtual reference services using request forms to make research queries either in print or electronic from the library	25	27.7	26	28.8	16	17.7	23	25.5
3. Access to online or computerized system (OPAC) to assist students access library collections	38	42.2	23	25.5	19	21.1	10	11.1
4.Consultation services through email, toll free telephone services	33	36.6	21	23.3	18	20	18	20
5. Access to inter library loan services such texts supplementary reading and reference services	13	14.4	41	45.5	26	28.8	10	11.1
6. Online user education services library orientation programme available through	31	34.4	19	21.1	12	13.3	28	31.1
7. Document Delivery Service (DDS)-ICT based document delivery of documents in digitalized format through the electronic mail.	37	41.1	22	24.4	11	12.2	20	22.2
Source: Field data, Jan 2023								

In order to identify the various library resources available to distance students, it was necessary to ascertain the information needs of students. It could be concluded from Table 5 that the respondents agreed that 'OPAC assisted students to access library collections' and hence it scored the highest percentage of (67.7%) per respondent among other factors. This occurred during residential school period. 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 percentage score of (27.7%). Thus, respondents did not strongly agree to the provision of their information needs through social media services (Table 6).

Table 6: Adequate provision of information needs

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Absolutely no	42	30.4
Mostly no	57	41.3
Neither yes or no	15	10.9
Mostly yes	22	15.9
Absolutely yes	2	1.4
Total	138	100
Source: Field data, Jan 2023		

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. In Table 6, the results show 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 7).

Table 7: Challenges of accessibility of library services

Questionnaire item	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. Internet connectivity	37	41.1	22	24.4	11	12.2	20	22.2
2. Library and computer training	11	12.2	14	15.5	42	46.6	23	25.5
3. Geographical isolation	33	36.6	21	23.3	18	20	18	20
4. Obtaining study materials	25	27.7	26	28.8	16	17.7	23	25.5
5. Inability to interact with library staff	31	34.4	19	21.1	12	13.3	28	31.1
6. IT tools such as computer, IPads, tablets	13	14.4	41	45.5	26	28.8	10	11.1
7. Borrowing library books	38	42.2	23	25.5	19	21.1	10	11.1
Source: Field data, Jan 2023								

In terms of the challenges which the distance learners faced in accessing library resources and services, Table 7 indicates that (67.7%) of the respondents agreed that borrowing library books was a biggest challenge they faced. This could be attributed to their being off campus learners. On the other hand, (65.5%) of the respondents agreed that Internet connectivity was another challenge they faced. This could be attributed to the area's most of the distance learners lived in. Related to this challenge (59.9%) of the respondents agreed that geographical isolation was yet another challenge hampering their access to library books. On the contrary, the majority of the respondents (72.1%) disagreed that, 'library and computer training' was a challenge they faced in accessing library resources and services as against other factors.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that library orientation organized by the library meant to bring awareness of the resources and services available in the library for the distance learners was not serving any purpose as the distance learners had little or no time for orientation when they reported for residential school due to series of class schedules. The effect of this challenge is that distance learners who enroll on distance program may not be aware of the availability of library resources and services and hence under utilize the library. Moreover, geographical isolation was identified as a major barrier to distance students. In addition, obtaining study materials and borrowing library materials, distance students were 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 distance learners. It is against this background that the researcher explored the level of accessibility of 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 distance education students, since this helps in bringing out quality students. Since the students of distance education 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 have suggested that the perception of librarians that isolation is a significant challenge for distance learners 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 distance learners.

Academic librarians must endeavor to implement comprehensive information literacy programmes to overcome the challenge of awareness of library services. As put by Abubakar 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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