

A glimpse into resources in aid of library and information service for the emerging distance education: a case of Botswana.

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Abstract

Distance education is not a recent phenomenon in Botswana. From the training of teachers to training and re-training of nurses and floating of other secondary and tertiary level courses, distance education in the country has come of age. The buildup of upgrading enrolled nurses (EN) to registered nursing (RN) by distance delivery system was a new fillip added to the venture in recent past.

In Botswana today, education is made available by distance mode to several individuals including the politicians, political and economic refugees, those affected by conflicts and also asylum seekers, among others. Thus in consonance with the belief that this learning mode can contribute to social stability and improve livelihood, training and knowledge is taken to the marginalized, isolated and underprivileged. Some examples can be seen in the efforts of such institutions as Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL), as well as the cross-border institutions. Consequent upon the emerging expansion of using open and distance learning in a range of situations and the opportunities it offers for all categories of people to improve themselves socially, politically and economically or widen access to learning opportunities, this paper notes the dispersal of distance learners in the country and taps into untapped resources that could be exploited to strengthen distance education.

As necessary ingredients to quality learning, the essential role of libraries in this form of education is discussed. The paper also takes a glimpse into a range of available resources that can be utilized to provide library and information resources and services to the emerging distance learners in Botswana. Discussed in the paper also are the application of appropriate technologies such as the liberalized telecommunications services including mobile telephony; the products of the licensed internet service providers (ISPs), private telecommunications networks (PTNs), as well as other ICT resources.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Botswana finds itself in a period of history when social attitudes and values around the world are changing at an unprecedented rate (Presidential Task Group 1997). Looking around, a number of changes are perceptible. For instance, changes could be seen in the United Nations Millenium development goals which "world's countries" including Botswana "and all the world's leading development institutions" subscribe to. Education is known to have a major part to play in attaining each of the targets set. Another development is Education for All initiative, led by UNESCO. The initiative among others aims at ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met by 2015 through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes. Also embedded as part of the goals is: "Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills" (Unesco 2000). As if to mobilise and braze up for the above challenges, Botswana envisages in its Vision 2016 that the nation will be an educated and informed nation when it turns 50 years of independence. In order to meet the target, the Government of Botswana is committed to ensure that education and training are provided not only through conventional means but through continuing, open and distance education.

Suffice it to say that the initial noticeable craving for education in Botswana has made it a major focus in the country over the years. It is apparent at independence that the conventional system of education could not cope with the initial human resources needs and demand of the nation. The search for other viable alternative for manpower development especially for teachers and nurses could only be found in distance education. Therefore, training of teachers at Salisbury Correspondence College (in the then Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe) in early 1960s heralded the debut of distance/cross-border education system; and later Francistown Teachers College in Botswana. The success of distance programmes for training of teachers encouraged the floating of other courses including the provision of Junior Secondary School Certificate programmes, as well as courses leading to General Certificate of Education (GCE "O" levels) by distance. The buildup of upgrading enrolled nurses (EN) to registered nursing (RN) by distance system was a new fillip added to the venture in recent past before an Act of the Parliament No. 20, brought Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) into existence in December 1998.

In the meantime the Centre for Continuing Education – the outreach arm of the University of Botswana was legislated into existence in 1987 to ensure that distance education programmes are planned and well coordinated at the tertiary level. The Centre presently has in its menu four degree and four diploma programmes by distance mode. Even though some specific certificate qualification requirements are clearly laid down for admission into any of the courses, some leverage is made for matured entry qualification. This is in respect of potential students of 25 years old and above who would want to study any of the courses but do not possess the certificate requirements. Such adults are made to write a qualifying test which, once passed,

offers the candidates admission. In consonance with the belief that distance education can help contribute to social stability and improve livelihood of people, encouragements are given to enable young people and adults participate and register for courses of their choice and improve themselves.

It is also important to note that probably for reasons of lack of variety of courses to satisfy the immediate yearning and needs of people or the inability of the local institutions to cope with the voracious demand of people for education, quite a sizeable number of institutions from outside the country are now deeply seated in Botswana in what is known as cross-border education offering training in different areas of knowledge. Typical among the cross-border institutions in Botswana today are the University of South Africa (UNISA), Zimbabwe Open University, the University of Derby in the UK etc. From a recent study done by this author, it was established that distance learners are ubiquitous people located in various parts of the country...they are found in the metropolitan, as well as semi-rural and remote rural locations in the country.

Standing as a model of stability, democracy and economic prosperity in a region where civil strife or social upheaval, political and economic mismanagement are rife, Botswana natural becomes the "beautiful bride" that attracts political and economic refugees, those affected by conflicts and also asylum seekers from neighbouring countries. Since distance learning is capable of contributing to social stability and improve livelihood, education and training is taken to various categories of the populace - the marginalized, isolated and underprivileged and the refugees. With distance education providing educational opportunities to all categories of people in the community (without having to leave their jobs) on variety of areas, it is not uncommon today to find politicians too as students. It therefore follows from above discourse that distance education programmes in Botswana are made available to quite a number of people from diverse setting and background.

Consequent upon the emerging expansion of using open and distance learning in a range of situations; and given the opportunities it offers for all categories of people including the children and young people, adults and people of diverse enterprise to improve themselves socially, politically and economically or widen access to learning opportunities, all efforts should be geared toward provision of quality education. This can be made possible if library and information resources and services are part of the package made available to distance learners in their various locations in the same way as education is taken to their doorsteps.

DISTANCE LEARNING AND THE ROLE OF LIBRARY

As open and distance learning beckons to people, more and more academic institutions are turning to this mode of learning. This falls in line with the observation of Cross (1987) at a conference on Adult Learning in Central Michigan University. She had declared: "the trend is as clear as it is steady. The college campus has burst explosively from its boundaries, and decentralization of learning is a major trend of our times".

In the light of institutions of learning scrambling to float distance learning programmes, one particular issue that should be borne in mind as a necessary ingredient to distance learning is library and information service to distance learners. Indeed a snag that has been of concern to many authors in distance education is the provision of library and information service. It was this fear that prompted Kaye (1981) to clamour "a student needs to have access to a well-stocked library". The conviction of the necessity of library for student prompted him to conclude that "its absence is perhaps the single most serious limitation of distance education at university level". Other authors like Watson (1992, 1997), Appleton (1997), Cavanagh and Tucker (1997), and others have established that access to quality library resources and services is a critical factor in any academic programme of merit. They therefore made the clarion calls to the academic

institutions running distance education programmes that they have a responsibility to provide their distance learners with library and information resources and facilities equivalent to those available to their on-campus counterparts.

The issue of credibility and equivalence of distance education to the traditional mode has been given a lot of thoughts by some authors. Credibility, Bobb-Semple (1997) says, “depends not only on the quality of instruction, fundamental though that may be, but also on the adequacy of learning support services which must include easy access to sources of information”. He goes on to say that “access to adequate and relevant information resources contributes greatly to ensuring equity and achieving parity”. He drew the conclusion that consequently, the existence of an effective and efficient library service is a key requirement of any distance education programme of quality. In order to concretise this belief, Watson (1997) has some suggestion in what she describes as a facilitatory institutional philosophy for library service. Her submission is that “in order to provide quality library and information service for distance learning and distance education, it is necessary for any institution offering distance education programme and courses to institute a philosophy that recognises the provision of library service to their students”.

As if lending credence to the assertion of Bobb-Semple, Johnson (1986), a Special Commissioner to the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission in Australia, in an opening address on Library services in distance education, has this to say about the role of libraries in distance education; “In the development of distance education libraries have a central place. They supply crucial learning resources”. He added that “those providing distance services have particular problems beyond those of libraries in conventional institutions: special problems of costs in book purchase, in postage”. In administration, he recounts that “special problems of administration involved in the whole business of dispatch and retrieval; special problems of counselling bemused students who are not simply on the other side of a desk but may be hundreds of kilometres away”. He further succinctly declares that “without [quality] library services, the success of distance education in [Australia] will not continue”.

The academic library has traditionally remained central to educational process. It has always been perceived as the measure of quality of an educational institution. In a study which examined provision of education below university level in English-speaking West Africa, “evidence was adduced to advance the view that the existence of, and adequate provision in, libraries significantly enhanced the success and quality of national education programmes. In those countries where expansion of formal education was not supported by a similar growth in library provision, the quality of education suffered” (John 1977).

Possibly for reasons of convenience, a lot of concentration has been given to the provision of library and information service in the formal learning environment. But then the other dimension is that in the event that the library and information service is provided to the distance learners, will there be some equity of service for them when juxtaposed with the service accessible to students in conventional system?

The American Library Association, through one of its arms, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), was one of the first notable organizations to take up the challenge for the provision of library and information service to distance learners. In its guidelines, the ACRL (2000) tackled the issue of equivalence in library service between the traditional students and distance learners. The philosophy of the guidelines for distance learning library services therefore notes that: “All the stakeholders in distance learning should also receive equity and parity treatment in library services and resources in the same way as those in conventional system”. It also hints that “Irrespective of where the students, tutors and programmes may be positioned accessibility to adequate library facilities is important for any higher academic skills to be accomplished”. It therefore counsels that “equity and justice demand that specialized and or

personalized library service should be administered to students and faculty members of distance learning in order that they may also have access to a full range of library services and materials". What resources are therefore available in Botswana that distance teaching institutions can tap to ensure distance learners meet their library and information needs?

APPROPRIATE (AND AVAILABLE) TECHNOLOGIES FOR USE IN BOTSWANA

With a land area of 582,000 square kilometres and the emerging expansion of using open and distance learning in a range of situations as identified earlier, Botswana has a wide dispersal of distance learners spread all over the country. It is therefore important to examine information resources/services and indeed, appropriate technologies that could be exploited to strengthen and enhance the quality of distance learning and meet the information needs of distance learners in the country.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

The Government of Botswana appreciates so much the significance of ICT. Indeed, in some departments and institutions like the University of Botswana, the policy makes it mandatory that all operations must be ICT driven. Hall and Lewin (2005) observe that the Government of Botswana in its recognition of the importance of ICT to the future economic and social development of the country articulates its vision thus:

"Botswana will be a global competitive knowledge and information society where lasting improvements in social, economic and cultural development is achieved through effective use of information and communications technology".

Part of the goals of the Government policy on ICT is "to provide universal service and access to information and communications facilities in the country with, for example, an Internet access point in every village". It is therefore important to note that the Government telecommunication effort for instance is not concentrated in urban centres only. Hall and Lewin (2005) note that the provision of "widespread access to telecommunications for voice services and Internet access in rural areas is clearly an important part of the Government's ICT policy". A number of workable strategies are being put in place by the Government to achieve access. The execution of the policy is no doubt beneficial to distance learners both in urban and rural locations as this makes it possible for them to have access to the ICT facilities to meet their information needs.

Provision of virtual services, like Web pages, Internet searching and using technology for electronic connectivity is part of the recommendations of ACRL to distance teaching institutions to meet the information needs of learners. With the ICT facilities in place in Botswana, a number of library services including reference and information services can be obtained by distance learners from their various remote locations to their institutional or collaborating libraries. It is now tested and found to be workable to carry out regenerated and hybrid reference and information services not just through the old traditional forms such as in-person point-of-service, telephone, and e-mail, but also through IM (Instant Messaging), Short Message Service (SMS) (text messaging function of cell/mobile phone), blogs, wikis, library pages on MySpace and Facebook, and virtual reference desks.

Telecommunication Services and effect (Mobile Telephony)

In pursuit of the goal to provide universal and access to ICT, the Government liberalized the telecommunications services in 1998 and consequently broke the monopoly of Botswana Telecommunications Corporation (BTC) when mobile telephony licence was awarded to two private companies. Whilst the BTC provides fixed phones in homes, offices and shops including public places, the mobile phone services are left with two private companies to operate. Apart from private individuals owning their mobile phones, the growth of “under-the-tree”, “under-the-umbrella” commercially-run payphone services has made new opportunities for access to telephony. Sebusang, Masupe and Chumoi (2005) indicate that “the subsequent licensing of other service providers such as Internet service providers (ISPs), data service providers and private telecommunications networks (PTNs) has added to the overall growth of the sector”.

The impact of the liberalization is that more than ever before, it is now much easier to reach out to and exchange communications between two or more parties who are separated in space and time. In this respect, it is possible for a registered user of a library from a remote location to communicate with and/or make a request to his subject librarian. Apart from mobile telephony, short message services (smses) are tolerable ways of communication between mobile telephone devices, which a distance learner can use to reach out and obtain services from the library. In addition, since some mobile phones possess email/web facility, it is also possible to use the function to access the web, send and receive emails. In a recent study of tertiary level distance learners in Botswana by this author, the findings established that 95.1% of the 364 respondents had cell phones but only 12 (3.3%) used SMS to contact their library or subject librarians.

Library Provision

Libraries in Botswana can be categorized as academic, public and private. The major academic libraries comprise the University of Botswana Library (UBL) and the libraries of six Colleges of Education and other tertiary level institutional libraries like Institute of Health Sciences in the country. Of all these, the UBL is known to have outstanding resources to cater for its primary clientele, as well as people from outside the university. The UBL doubles as a National Reference Centre and is open for use of researchers from outside the university community. Apart from the main branch of the library located in Gaborone, the UBL has two branch libraries in the north of the country at the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE), Francistown and the university’s research centre in Maun. In the South, another branch library exists at the Faculty of Technology in Gaborone.

It is important to note that one of the vehicles that made information available to people in the country is Botswana National Library Service (BNLS), whose mission statement is “to provide information to all, nation-wide by means of an efficient and effective library service”. In discharging its duty, BNLS establishes public libraries in major cities, towns and villages in the country. It also provides reading rooms in most rural villages across the country. Once registered, members of the public including distance learners are allowed to use the BNLS facilities across the country, including its inter library loans facilities.

Private libraries are usually owned by individuals, professionals and organizations and may not be open for use to members of the public except with special permission. For instance, BNPC and British Council libraries may be made available to some individuals when applied for use. With proper arrangement, facilities of these libraries can be made available for distance learners. Materials can be sent by registered post or mobile libraries (run by BNLS) to the location of distance learners.

Mass Media

The use of mass-media such as radio and television, as well as newspapers (print and electronic formats) usually has shrewd effect as channels of information to people. According to the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN, 2007), "the Botswana Broadcasting Bill seeks to establish a three-tier broadcast service: public, private and community. At present there is a national state broadcaster, while the private sector has two radio stations and a private television station. Private electronic media are confined to broadcasts within the capital, Gaborone". The connotation of the limited coverage granted the private electronic media (operating exclusively within the capital) is that the distance learners outside Gaborone or in rural areas are shortchanged should any information that affects them is aired through or placed on the private media. There is a variety of newspapers (including Government freely distributed daily newspapers) both in print and electronic which can also be used. These media can work collaboratively with the library of distance teaching institutions to meet the information needs of distance learners.

CONCLUSION

It has been established that irrespective of the education and training being provided – be it in the area of livelihoods; health; governance, conflict and social justice or even in the provision for children and young people – and at any level, provision of library and information facilities will go a long way to remove any fear of inadequacy in open and distance learning. Whilst an enabling environment may be created for utilization of distance teaching institutions, distance learners need to also be adequately furnished with the needed information and equipped with appropriate skills to enable them utilize the facilities. For instance training would be required for them in computing and information skills.

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