

## **COPING WITH THE TYRANNY OF LIBRARY SERVICE AT A DISTANCE: A TYPICAL AFRICAN CASE**

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### **Introduction**

Even though Africa's reasons for accepting distance education to solving its educational problems are not totally removed from the global ones (Kabwasa & Kaunda, 1973), the history surrounding the emergence and wide acceptance of distance education in Africa cannot be divorced from the colonial experience in the continent. The educational opportunities opened to the natives in the colonial Africa were to a large extent grossly defective and insufficient. Various commissions on education set up on the eve or immediately after the attainment of independence reported the dire need to place emphasis on human development. John (1996a: 4) reports that a lack of classrooms, qualified teachers and school materials were the norm. He noted that with the exception of South Africa, Ethiopia and the Arab states, university education within the rest of Africa was rare. Some other exceptions before independence particularly in West Africa were Sierra Leone and Nigeria that had Forah Bay College and University College (Ibadan) respectively. With these two higher institutions of learning in West Africa, higher education was a real struggle for the citizens in the sub-region.

While there were two higher institutions of university status for citizens in West Africa to scramble for placement, the situation in East and Southern Africa presents a different picture. According to John (1996a: 4) the political conditions in the sub-region dictated that indigenous Africans, particularly in South Africa and Zimbabwe, were not to benefit from the provision made for the children of white settlers. This deprivation could only compel the indigenous people to search for alternative approach to education.

Consequent upon the shortfall experienced in the colonial times, most African countries at independence realized the need to prop up their education programmes at various levels. Thus the establishment of schools at various levels was given a boost. Adekanmbi (1997: 2) states that while various educational programmes have been put in place to combat the high level of shortage of locals to take over from departing colonists, the various educational plans have not been able to meet up with dimensions of development needs. Distance education was therefore an obvious option adopted to cope with the chronic shortage. Omolewa (1976, 1978) traced the initial foray of this mode of learning to the external examinations organised by foreign institutions of higher learning –notably, Universities of London, Cambridge and Oxford, which were not backed up by tuition. The gap created by examinations without tuition prepared ground for mushrooming of some correspondence colleges like Rapid Results College, Central African Correspondence College and International Correspondence Schools among others. The continued existence of privately owned distance education institutions even in the face of growth of formal educational institutions probably informed the various African governments to establish state owned distance education institutions.

As sub-Sahara Africa announced its arrival in the world scene of distance education, Adekanmbi (1997: 2) opines that Africans emerged with their own distinct distance education institutions managed and run by individuals, tertiary institutions, government agencies while some came as joint cooperative projects between agencies and schools in the developed world and governments in Africa. Indeed, there is the preponderance of distance education institutions that sprang up after independence in Africa. Jones (1979) gives a catalogue of some of these institutions. They include the university of Zambia which as part of its functions set up a correspondence unit in 1963 and which since 1967 started operating and attending to some 'National Development Plans' and the National Correspondence College of Zambia which in the late 70s provided tuition for 33,000 candidates who were taking a large variety of school subjects. There are also the establishments in 1967 of the Teachers' In-service project in Nigeria located at the Ahmadu Bello University, the Mauritius College

of the Air established in partnership with the International Extension College and the Malawi correspondence courses for training of teachers. Others include the use of radio broadcasts in Kenya in addition to correspondence courses; the offering by the Institute of Adult Education in Ghana of correspondence education programmes, and the establishment of the Moshi Cooperative Education Centre in Tanzania in 1964 which paved the way for the government to sign an agreement with the Swedish Aid to establish a national Correspondence Institute (NCI) (Jones, 1979). Also of note are the records of developments in Uganda of the Centre for Continuing Education, Makerere University's Correspondence courses aimed at training teachers and public clerical officers, and the existence of Central African Correspondence College in Zimbabwe. At the early stage too, the University of Zimbabwe had run part of its Diploma in Adult Education programme at a distance (Jones, 1979). Records are also available of efforts made in Swaziland, Botswana, Lesotho, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa, among others.

Also worthy of mention is the use of distance education in other areas like primary health care, agriculture and women issues apart. The INADES-Formation and the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) have been a driving force in applying distance education in these areas in countries like Somalia, Sudan and Tanzania. Other countries include Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Rwanda, Togo and Zaire, Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia (John, 1996b: 28).

It is pertinent to say that perhaps in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa today, there is the establishment of, at least, one or more state-sponsored universities running distance education either through single- or dual-mode system. It however needs be mentioned most pathetically that at the peak of the effort to provide the right educational programmes for its people, the continent is confronted by the downturn in the economy. The corollary of this economic quagmire is the sharp decline in the amount African governments could vote for education. For instance, between 1980 and 1992 current figures show that the public annual expenditure per inhabitant on education in Africa (excluding the Arab states) dropped from US\$42 to US\$28, whereas it rose in Europe from US\$336 to US\$593 during the same period (Unesco, 1994). Most of the educational institutions particularly, distance related institutions, have been bearing the grave consequences of inadequate funding which manifest in not-too-impressive facilities including library support services being provided.

One strongly held belief in academia is that the quality of any academic programme is embellished when library facilities are accessible. For quality distance education, therefore, accessibility to library is a *sine qua non* (Oladokun, 1997: 273). The seriousness of accessibility or otherwise of distance learners to library facility is viewed when Kaye (1981) notes that "a student needs to have access to a well stocked library", adding, "its absence is perhaps the single most serious limitation of distance education at university level". With the desperate situation in African educational system the questions that can be on the lips now are how are libraries of institutions running distance education programmes in Africa presently coping? What are those things that still need be done to improve service to distance learners here?

### **The practice in sub-Saharan Africa**

Except for few universities in sub-Saharan Africa, distance education programmes usually have their audiences attracted within the country where the institution is located. In the same vein very few distance education universities in the continent operate single-mode system –more often than not, most universities run distance education programme alongside the conventional one in what is known as dual-mode system. One thing that cannot be denied is the continual growth and expansion of distance education systems, particularly at higher levels in recent past. Unfortunately until such international organisations such as the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE), Commonwealth of Learning (COL), United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural organisation (UNESCO) and Agence de Cooperation Culturelle et Technique (ACCT) became involved in the operations of distance education programmes in Africa, collaboration of effort either in the development of joint projects or the exchange of ideas was rarely practised, sought or considered (John, 1997: 155).

Generally, in most African countries, library support service to distance learners leaves so much to be desired. There exists a yawning gap between the library services and resources available to the traditional students and those available to distance learning students. The urban-based distance education students who live close to the location of their universities are usually at great advantage of

enjoying unfettered library facilities of their institutions. Those that are at a distance from the university are never that lucky as adequate provision is hardly given to them. In some cases, library support services are non-existent to non-metropolitan-based students. In theory, all students, irrespective of the mode of learning, are expected to enjoy the same library facilities. But then, this is only possible when they are within the premises of the university. Unfortunately most distance education students live in far away remote places and are rarely able to visit the university library for a long period of time. Telephone costs to contact the libraries are usually exorbitant, where available. Postal services to send materials to students are hardly reliable. In most cases, students are enjoined to use the library facilities nearest to them, whereas, considerations are hardly given to whether such libraries have relevant stock or not. As if this yoke was not enough the university or its agents hardly have hand in negotiating the use of other libraries for and on behalf of the students. The arrangements to use such libraries are also left for students to undertake on personal basis. In cases where other library allows students to use its facilities, such students are allowed reference access only; they are not given borrowing privileges. This is the situation with the distance learners of the University of Nairobi Kenya, who could use the library of Kenyatta University also in Kenya for reference access only (Kamau, 1997: 172). Indeed, it is typical of most African University libraries not to allow a student of another university access to their facilities, even in the same country.

While some institutions may be willing to provide library support for their students the poor state of economy makes it impracticable. To supply them needed materials that would be used by their students, some institutions depend on donors. For instance, when the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) was established, Mmari (1997: 193) says that the stock of books and journals held by existing (public and private) libraries (which OUT relied upon for its students) was limited in quantity and scope to support degree level programmes. The OUT therefore decided to “approach traditional donors to libraries especially those in developed countries for university-level materials to augment those already in existence”. Yet in some other places distance education students are required to make some contribution when registering to purchase book. Where two or more students have different books, it is expected that “students would exchange books among themselves” in order to broaden their exposure (Kamau, 1997: 171).

In order to bridge the separation of time and space existing between distance learners and their institutions, providers of distance education occasionally organise residential programmes for their students. It is such opportunities of residential programmes that some libraries utilise to meet the information needs of their students. However, for obvious reasons, it is usually infeasible for the residential programme to hold within the campus of the distance learning institutions for all the students. Only those who have the opportunity to do the programme on the campus of their institution often have the benefit of enjoying the library facilities. Others who run their own programmes in hired premises are usually regarded as aliens who could not be obliged with such facilities (Oladokun 1997: 273). It should be added that such institutional libraries that only wait for this opportunity of residential programmes before performing their duty of meeting the information needs of students are yet to realise the paradigm shift and rise to the challenge. This is what obtains in some African distance education institutions. Even then, being in the institutional library is no guarantee that students’ needs will be met. The obvious inadequacies of the libraries to meet students’ needs are sometimes exploited by some lecturers/tutors who prepare ‘handouts’, ask students to buy and note down the identity numbers of the obedient ones that comply. This practice has been observed in some West African distance education institutions. For instance, COSIT students of University of Lagos, Nigeria would have a tale to tell of this experience.

The impact of electronic communications is seen as having influenced library provision in a positive way for user. How is African University library fairing on the application of this technology to the advantage of distance learner? While advanced countries of the world are progressing steadily in the development and utilisation of these technologies, it is pathetic to note that most African countries are not keeping pace with development in the technological world. Most university libraries in Africa still make use of what can be described as pedestrian approach to render service. It is disheartening to note that not many of these libraries can boast of facsimile facilities, while a good number of them still read facilities like e-mail, and Internet on the pages of newspapers (Oladokun 1997: 351). In some institutions that manage to have e-mail system, the facility is treasured and its use jealously monitored in the office of the Vice Chancellor or Deputy Vice Chancellor while the libraries that need it mostly hardly have access to it. A case of good vision that is crippled by inadequate finance! Thus it has not been that possible to exploit the advantage of the modern technology for library users in most part of

the sub-Saharan Africa. Given that some of the modern technologies are available, erratic power supply and extremely poor telecommunication system that are trademarks of most of the countries in the continent could pose a stumbling block to effective use of the facilities.

### **Shining Examples**

African universities are not completely full of catalogue of woes. There are few examples of institution struggling to illuminate the entire educational system in the continent. Though there may still be room for improvement, two of them that deserve to be mentioned are the University of South Africa (UNISA) and University of Botswana. UNISA is a single-mode university operating distance education only, while University of Botswana operates dual-mode system. Telecommunication systems in the two countries are very good and could probably be said to be the best in Africa, while the universities are not denied of the modern information technologies. The two institutions enjoy excellent hi-tech libraries and could be reached from anywhere in the globe. These two institutional libraries are thus able to use modern technology to the advantage of their ubiquitous distance learners. Perhaps it is better to talk on Unisa since University of Botswana Library operation is being modelled in the same fashion with Unisa. In order to meet the needs of its numerous students in South Africa, Unisa maintains some branch libraries in regional offices apart from the main library. The university also maintains relationship with some Municipal libraries where limited book collections are kept. Students access the collections either through a personal visit to any of the libraries or have the library materials posted to them. Using the latest information technology, the entire collection is accessed through an *opac* system with terminals located not only in the main library but also throughout the main campus and branch libraries (Behrens & Grobler (1997: 83-84). In such few places like Unisa and University of Botswana, among few others, can African University libraries have some ray of hope.

### **The way Forward**

In the spirit of democratization of education and the need to extend educational opportunities to all sections of mankind, distance education has emerged in Africa as a child of necessity. This mode of learning is bound to alter the renowned method of information dispensation. Thus unlike the traditional way of meeting the users information needs, the librarians in the new paradigm, would need to switch on their touch to search and provide information for this category of clientele in a specialised way. In rendering service to distant learners in Africa, the following suggestions are offered.

- It has been established that no single African University with its apparatus is sufficiently equipped to address the multifarious needs of these ubiquitous students at the right time. It is therefore important for distance education library to establish collaboration, which makes the pooling and sharing of resources possible with other libraries.
- Closely related to above is the issue of reciprocal or contractual borrowing. If this structure is put in place in various African countries as obtains in Australia and elsewhere, it would be possible for distance education students to enjoy free access to any university libraries other than their own. This system would ensure that students of other universities are not regarded as aliens and treated as such within the same country. These students would therefore not only be able to consult reference materials, but also have some borrowing right.
- The establishment of sub-regional sub-groupings like West African Distance Education Association (WADEA) and Distance Education Association of Southern African (DEASA), where providers of distance education discuss ideas of mutual concern, is quite commendable. But then after several years of coming to existence, it is regrettable that librarians from distance education institutions are not given priority in these sub-groupings. It is important that the extension of sub-regional collaborative strategy be considered to include the information providers in order that they may learn from one another.
- Even though most African countries are faced with economic downturn, which invariably leads to poor funding of education, it is known that some of these countries misplaced their priorities on non-consequential issues. It should be said pointblank to African governments that greater attention should be paid to these institutions with a view to having special funding arrangements that would enable libraries to properly serve distant learners. African governments also need to improve their telecommunication facilities.

- To ensure prompt deliveries of materials to students, train service and commercial vehicles plying the routes could be used.
- International organisations like the Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO would also need to let their impact be felt in the libraries of distance education institutions. This effort could come in form of organising training, orientation and refresher course on aspect of distant librarianship.
- It is observed that distance (education) librarianship is not included yet in the curriculum of most library schools in Africa. It will be quite nice if something is done along this direction.

### **Conclusion**

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that library support service to distance education students in African Universities is grossly deficient. This essentially is the culmination of poor funding and tactless strategies adopted by most institutional libraries involved. All hopes are however not lost. The happenings in places like UNISA and University of Botswana are enough to inform us that if there is enough commitment on the part of all stakeholders we do not have reason to be despondent yet.

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