

PRIMING LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICE DELIVERY IN AID OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNERS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract: Given the understanding that the word 'distance' portends 'standing apart', 'separation' or 'remoteness', the term distance education could connote the form of study where there is the element of separation between the learner and the teacher. This signifies that teaching and learning between the teacher and learner are conducted at a distance and indeed, remoteness is a common feature of this form of education. Consequent upon the fact that the students who enrolled for this type of education are hardly seen on the campus of their institution to enjoy any form of face-to-face interaction with their lecturers and librarians, they are sometimes referred to as remote learners. But then, irrespective of their scattered locations, a library of an institution that floats open and distance learning programmes owes it a binding duty and responsibility to ensure that students are reached and accorded the right service equitable to what is given to the on-campus face-to-face students. This paper examines the concept of distance learning in-depth and indicates the major distinction between this mode of education delivery and the conventional face-to-face teaching and learning process. The paper underscores the general characteristics of distance learners, culminating in the strategies that could be adopted by the library of an institution that promotes distance education either as a single- or dual- mode system to meet the information needs of these learners. The methodological approach adopted for this paper revolves around an in-depth desk-top literature review and the author's viewpoints based on the prevailing digital environment of distance learners in Botswana. Based on the issues raised in the paper, some recommendations are made to assist an institution that is preparing for open and distance learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The understanding of the word 'distance' according to The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) portends 'standing apart', 'detach', 'separation' or 'remoteness'. The term distance education could connote the form of study where there is the element of separation and detachment or aloofness between the learner and the teacher. In other words, teaching and learning between the teacher and learner are conducted at a distance. This therefore embodies the major distinction between this method of education delivery and the conventional face-to-face teaching and learning process. Remoteness is a common feature of this form of education. Consequent upon the fact that the students who enrolled for this type of education are hardly seen at the campus

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of their institution to enjoy any form of face-to-face interaction with their lecturers, they are sometimes referred to as remote learners.

The concept of distance education often interchangeably called distance learning has been variously defined by associations, organisations and scholars in the field. For instance, American Association of University Professors (2007) perceives distance education as instruction between a teacher and students when they are separated by physical distance and communication is accomplished by one or more technological media. Frank (2008) describes the concept as a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology, and instructional systems design that is effectively incorporated in delivering education to students who are not physically “on site” to receive their education. Frank further affirms that teachers and students may communicate asynchronously (at times of their own choosing) by exchanging printed or electronic media, or through technology that allows them to communicate in real time (synchronously). UNESCO (2016) defined distance education as a form of education in which the instructor and the student are separated in time and space, through forms of online learning, blended learning, with the use of printed resources delivered to students by mail or other tools.

Keegan (1999) has repeatedly modified his definition since 1983 when he made the first attempt. The latest of the modifications seems to provide a more detailed definition. It also takes into consideration some recent development in the field of distance education. For this reason, this paper will adopt Keegan's (1999: 50) definition where he sees distance education as a form of education with the following five characteristics: First, “the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education)”. Second, “the influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programmes)”. Third, is “the use of technical media e.g. print, audio, video or computer, to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course”. Fourth, “the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue” (This, Keegan notes, distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education); and fifth, “the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals rather than in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings, either face-to-face or by electronic means, for both didactic and socialization purposes”.

Australian Christian College (ACC) (2020) sees distance education from the point of view of the numerous benefits it offers and says distance education caters to the diverse needs of learners globally. One of its primary advantages is the flexibility it

provides. ACC observes that with distance education, students can learn at their own pace, making it an ideal choice for those with varied schedules or commitments. This mode of learning also eliminates the need to commute, which not only saves time but also reduces the financial burden of transportation and related expenses. Furthermore, distance education opens up a plethora of educational opportunities. ACC asserts that whether residing in bustling cities or remote locales, students have access to high-quality education without geographical constraints and thus democratises learning, ensuring that quality education isn't limited to those within proximity to educational institutions.

Closely interlocked to distance education is the term 'open and distance learning'. In his attempt to unfold the etymology of open and distance learning (ODL), Biao (2012) asserts that ODL was first known as 'distance learning' before it became 'open and distance learning'. Biao believes that the concept 'distance learning' emerged from the idea of 'distance education' which came from 'correspondence education' which itself arose from 'non-formal education'. Biao avers that the motivation for the emergence of ODL was the inability of numerous qualified candidates to access tertiary education in regular or formal tertiary education institutions. This assertion was sustained by McAndrew (2010) who explicates that The Open University when established in 1969 met a challenge where approximately 5% of the adult population was able to attend university in the UK at the time. He recalls that higher education had very limited availability and, while the provision was expanding, many people were being left behind unable to meet entry level qualifications or find the time required for full time study away from employment. The Open University, according to McAndrew, sought to use the technology of the time to offer courses that addressed the distance barrier and the entry barrier to offer relatively large numbers of learners' access to higher education. He concluded that the mission adopted by the OU was to be "Open as to people, places, methods and ideas".

The UK Open University (OU) (2019) and authors like Maxwell (1995) also consider open education as an approach. In a discourse, Bağrıacık and Karataş (2022) gave an account of The UKOU that students have flexible access to the study materials, and they can engage in the activities and assignments from wherever they want. This flexibility and accessibility is identified as "openness" (The Open University, 2019). Similarly, Maxwell (1995) insists that every form of education has a level of openness. Distance education systems are generally considered to be open systems, because students are not required to study in a specific place and time.

In its submission on ODL, The Commonwealth of Learning (1999) – the umbrella body for open and distance learning in the Commonwealth countries, observes that there is no one definition of open and distance learning. The body claims that there are many

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approaches to defining the term, but confirms that most definitions pay attention to the following characteristics:

- separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or in both time and place;
- institutional accreditation; that is, learning is accredited or certified by some institution or agency. This type of learning is distinct from learning through your own effort without the official recognition of a learning institution;
- use of mixed-media courseware, including print, radio, and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, computer-based learning, and telecommunications. Courseware tends to be pre-tested and validated before use;
- two-way communication allows learners and tutors to interact as distinguished from the passive receipt of broadcast signals. Communication can be synchronous or asynchronous;
- possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials, learner–learner interaction, library study, and laboratory or practice sessions; and
- use of industrialised processes; that is, in large-scale open and distance learning operations, labour is divided and tasks are assigned to various staff who work together in course development teams.

In what seems to be the genesis of ODL in Africa, Biao (2012) believes the eagerness to accelerate the pace of educational development within their borders and fulfill the aims and meet the targets of various international agreements on education, many African nations started to employ open and distance learning strategies as tool for the 'massification' of education beginning from the late 1970s. Biao notes the process of massification was first directed towards the training of teachers before it was pointed towards other areas of education. Oladokun (2008) lends credence to this when he traced the establishment of ODL in Botswana starting with the first experiment where 15 students were registered with Salisbury Correspondence College to be trained as teachers in the early 1960's. He states that the experiment gave birth to Francistown Teachers' project between 1968 and 1973, followed by the establishment of Botswana Extension College (BEC) in 1973 with a change of focus from training of teachers to provision of Junior Secondary School Certificate courses as well as courses leading to General Certificate of Education. He records the eventual diversification of ODL in Botswana to upgrading Enrolled Nurses to Registered Nursing through distance education, and later degree awarding programmes starting with the Centre for Continuing Education, the outreach arm of the University of Botswana. Of course, ODL expands and assumes the dimension of cross-border education with institutions like University of Derby, University of South Africa and The Management College of Southern Africa etc.) which had visible presence in the country.

Unlike in the conventional system where the educational needs of learners are met through face-to-face classroom-bound and information needs met within the four walls of a campus-based library, ODL system presents a challenge to the library since its students are not only at a distance from their institutions of study, but also scattered. Yet the library and information needs of distance learners should also be promptly met and indeed, the library should not be seen to constitute any form of cog in the wheel of academic progress of distance learners. Thus in their disperse and remote locations, distance learners must be reached and served in the same way as teaching and learning materials get to them.

2. BENEFITS OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Open and distance learning offers numerous benefits, which authors have identified. But Bitonlinelearn (2021) appears to have a fairly good summation of them. It highlights the following points as the need for distance education

- **Explosion of knowledge:** There is explosion of knowledge because of rapid scientific and technological developments. The formal system of education on account of its rigidity and high cost, finds it difficult to incorporate new changes speedily as desired
- **Population Explosion:** Unprecedented growth rate of population has resulted in the corresponding increase in students. The formal education system serves a selected and limited number of students
- **Varied Needs:** Distance learning is needed to satisfy the varied needs of varied students
- **Earning while Learning:** Distance education is especially needed for those who want to learn while learning
- **Desire to Improve Qualifications:** There are many people who want to improve their education qualification while they are in jobs. Distance learning provides opportunities to such people to improve their qualifications
- **Geographical Isolation:** People may be geographical isolated because of distance or because a communication system has not been developed
- **Social Isolation:** People may be socially isolated or disadvantaged due to financial, physical, emotional or family circumstances
- **For Different Ages:** Distance learning can be used to teach people of different ages and to teach courses from a wide range of discipline areas
- **Universal Education:** Distance learning is needed to achieve the cherished goal of the nation for universalization of education
- **Democratic Aspirations:** Distance learning is needed to meet the great demand for democratisation of education from those sections of society that are neglected

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- **Self–Improvement:** Distance learning is needed from the point of view of self-learning and self-improvement of an individual who, otherwise is deprived of receiving proper education
- **Boon for In-Service Aspirants:** Open universities are a boon for in-service aspirants. They can improve their educational qualifications and by doing so, they can brighten up their chances of promotion
- **Easy Access:** It provides opportunities to large number of people who had previously been denied such opportunities.

3. ALLIED TERMINOLOGIES AND ORGANISATIONAL MODELS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education has some allied terminologies borne out of the practices of the system of education. Adekanmbi (1998) confirms that as a result of the variety of media used, different forms of distance education may emerge. Some of the terminologies include open learning, correspondence education, home study, external study, independent study, flexible learning, online/virtual learning or e-learning.

It should be noted that the system of education also has three identified organisational models for institutions operating distance education. These are single, dual and consortia modes. The single mode involves institutions founded for the purpose of offering distance education only e.g. University of South Africa, Zimbabwe Open University, Botswana Open University. The dual mode is the institution that provides both the traditional face-to-face and distance education. Examples of dual mode system can be found at the University of Botswana, University of Namibia, where distance education run side-by-side with full-time face-to-face programmes. Consortia mode involves groups of autonomous institutions (educational, publishing, broadcasting), which agree to combine to offer distance education. This mode is hard to come-by in Africa. Example is Western Governors University in the USA.

4. DISTANCE LEARNERS' INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Irrespective of the mode of learning, learners need to be motivated or assisted to learn by boosting their information environment. They need to have a guarantee that their information needs will be met by the library department that reserves the mandate to do so. In the digital era, it is obvious that the pedestrian approach of the traditional library service that consults and assist learners within the four walls of the library would not be appropriate for distance learners and not help the ubiquitous distance learners' information environment. Taking a brief discourse on the architecture of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in the UK, Powell and Lyon (2002) express the information environment as a “set of networked services that allows people to

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discover, access, use and publish resources within the ... heterogeneous collection of information resources and services (bibliographic, full-text, image, video, geo-spatial, datasets, etc.) of particular value to the further and higher education communities". Similarly, JISC (2007) contends that information environment "can be characterised as the set of network or online services that support publishing and use of information and learning resources".

Perhaps for reasons of the escalating development in information and communication technologies in the world, a new epithet "hybrid" is added to the concept to reflect the latest development. Sompel, Hochstenbach, and Pessemier (1997) seem to agree with this avowal when they note that due to the Internet-explosion and increasing availability of digital content ..., the spectrum of the information environment has diversified far beyond the traditional print-oriented library. Thus it is common today to hear of hybrid information environment (HIE).

In a document written for the UK Office for Library and Information Networking (UKOLN), Russell, Gardner and Miller (1999) describe a hybrid information environment as "one where an appropriate range of heterogeneous information services is presented to the user in a consistent and integrated way via a single interface". The aim of the information environment as argued by JISC is "to help provide convenient access to resources for research and learning through the use of ... resource management tools and the development of better services and practice". JISC (2007) further elaborates that the information environment aims to allow discovery, access and use of resources for research and learning irrespective of their location. Reiterating the importance of information environment in the lives of users, the Committee believes that information environment must be fit to serve the needs of students, teachers and researchers in further and higher education into the future, adding that it should "offer the user a more seamless and less complex journey to relevant information and learning resources".

5. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Open and distance learning operating either as single-, dual- or consortia- mode in any institution of learning is a system of education embraced worldwide for reasons of its numerous benefits. But as the system receives the support of governments and people in all the countries where it is established, it has a lot of drawbacks! Learners are known to suffer from high failure or low pass rate and withdrawal or discontinuance of participation in distance programmes. Bağrıacık and Karataş (2022) observed that while the demand for open and distance education is increasing, it also faces high dropout rates in Turkey. Studies have revealed that distance education suffers high attrition rate when compared with face-to-face on-campus programme. In a

comparative study of face-to-face and virtual education at a Public University in Peru by Chamorro-Atalaya et al (2023), the results indicate an increase in the average rate of failure from 25% to 34%. In other words, the results are equivalent to 242 students failed during the context of face-to-face education, and 438 students failed during the context of virtual education. In a doctoral dissertation on adult learners enrolled in virtual classroom, Smith (2010) observed that dropout rates among distance learners fluctuate between 40-80%.

Perhaps a more dreaded scenario was observed in the study of Simpson (2013) where he raised the same fundamental problem at the heart of international distance education – the problem of student retention and dropout! Figure 1 presents a comparison of completion rates in some conventional and distance institutions across the world.

The graph below, culled from Simpson (2013) study, revealed that the graduation rates for the distance institutions appear to vary between 0.5 - 20% compared with more than 80% for full-time face-to-face education in the UK. Whilst not discarding the possibility that other distance institutions could be doing much better, including private ones, Simpson observed that the University of Phoenix, which is one of the largest private providers in the USA, has only a 6% graduation rate on its distance programmes.

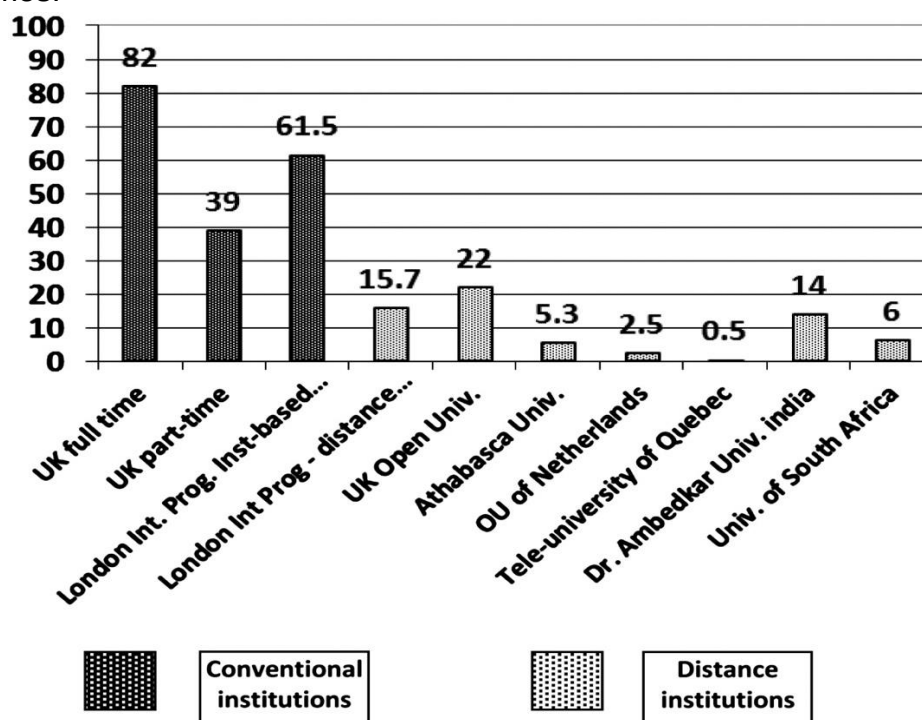


Figure 1. Graduation rates across a variety of higher education institutions (Simpson, 2013).

In their paper titled '*why do open and distance education students drop out?*' The findings from the interviews Bağriacık and Karataş (2022) conducted with 40 participants revealed that students decide to drop out mainly due to four main reasons: internal reasons, external reasons, student characteristics, and student skills. Whilst it is significantly noticeable that ODL programmes are phenomenally increasing, librarians seem to be confronted with the challenges of offering library and information service that is at par with what the on-campus students enjoy. Simpson calls for motivation and refers to the advocacy of a group he calls the Retentioneers that proactive support must not be denied distance learners. A number of questions arise from this advocacy. How much of effort do distance teaching institutions and their arms, including the libraries, make to be familiar with distance learners' characteristics to be able to provide them better service? What learning motivation will a distance institution put in place for the learners to assist them not to fall by the way-side? What proactive support do distance teaching institutions offer? How much of 'internal' and 'external' challenges of distance learners are known and assisted on by distance institutions? To what extent will the libraries of these institutions assist in motivating the distance learners and offering parity library and information services to them the same way as on-campus students receive?

6. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study was to examine the preparation for library and information service delivery in aid of open and distance learners in the digital era. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Examine the concept of open and distance learning in readiness for library and information service delivery
- Determine the distance learners context and characteristics to enable the library gauge how they can best be assisted
- Explore the motivating and strategic means through which distance learners can have access to library and information resources and services in their remote locations

7. METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on in-depth literature review and the author's experience as practicing information practitioners shouldered with the responsibility of assisting the off-campus students, especially distance learners, as well as educators in the field of library and information studies.

8. DISTANCE LEARNERS CONTEXT AND CHARACTERISTICS

Studies have shown the context of distance learners and their varied characteristics, culminating in the idea depicting the heterogeneity of this group of students. As such, distance learners cannot be treated as homogeneous group. Notwithstanding, it has been observed that many distance learners do share broad demographic and situational similarities that have often provided the basis for profiles of the "typical" distance learner in higher education" (Thompson, 1998). Galusha (2012) states that distance learning is student-centered learning, therefore, knowing the characteristics and demographics of the distance learners helps in understanding the potential barriers to learning. Although students' characteristics and needs may not guarantee success in a distance education course or program, it is easy to defend these factors as contributing to success

It is observed that the demography of distance learners may have some bearing in their effort to meet their information needs. For instance, the learners come from different households and communities that may be rural or urban, poor or rich. Nyirenda (1996: 3) observes that characteristics of learners in this category will "include sex, age, marital status and family size, place of residence (whether rural or urban), social status and responsibilities, income and financial resources" among others. Each of these factors is capable of influencing the information environment of the learners. For instance, for somebody that lives in a place that does not have electricity, accessibility to information and technological devices like computer, telephone and the Internet facilities will be hampered. The problem of digital divide could be more pronounced in people living in the socio-economic divide and environment where one has all the facilities at his disposal and the other does not. It is therefore important to note that the demography of these learners may have some impact in their effort to meet their information needs.

Related to the above is the varying degree of knowledge of information and communication technology (ICT) as well as information literacy skills which distance learners possess. Some do not even know how to write emails. Extant literature has established that distance learners may suffer from deficiency of these skills. Norris (2001) has noted that the chief concern about the digital divide is that the underclass of info-poor may become further marginalized in societies where basic computer skills are becoming essential for economic success and personal advancement, entry to good career and educational opportunities, full access to social networks, and opportunities for civic engagement. This seems to account for the assertion of Amrous, Daoudi and Ettaki (2013) when they insist that in the digital age, characterized by rapid technological change and proliferating information resources, the need of information literacy has notably increased. The trio avows that although information literacy is

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significant for students of all educational levels, it has become even more significant for e-learners. They therefore advised that e-learners/distance learners should acquire information skills, learn how to learn and use appropriate learning strategies.

Probing further into the locational dynamics influencing their information environment, Oladokun (2012) in a study affirms that distance learners in Botswana significantly fall into different locations in terms of where they lived and carried out their studies. Whilst many lived in metropolitan/urban areas which offer a much better and richer information environment, some of them lived in rural locations where information environment can be considered poor and cannot be favourably compared with those in urban areas. The result further shows that more females were also located in cities and towns (considered as urban or metropolitan areas) as well as village (rural areas) than their male counterparts. Nyirenda (1996) lends credence to the view that the environment in which the learner undertakes their studies affects learning one way or another. Those living in remote villages may also not have easy access to postal and transportation services which can make it difficult for them to easily receive materials that can be of advantage to them in writing their assignments, tests etc. unlike those that live in urban areas. Kamau (1998) expresses the view that distance learners from their remote locations may also experience lack of facilities such as study centres, schools, libraries and laboratories which may hinder learners' progress. Thus, rural-urban dichotomy is clearly visible, even as information divide between the rural areas and urban areas is distinct.

As distance learners are ubiquitous, the feeling of isolation has been seen as concerning and one typical trait known among most distance learners. Kamau (2005) in a treatise indicates that isolation is one of the characteristics of distance learners. As if to influence their environment, she pleads that "distance learners also need human support from tutors, mentors and fellow learners to reduce the feeling of isolation". Oladokun (2008) also suggests that as distance learners go about their studies by distance mode in various scattered locations across the country, it is assumed that accessibility to appropriate information resources and services would reduce the effect of distance and isolation that can be experienced in this type of learning mode. Another means of curtailing the disadvantages of isolation is to make use of colleagues and friends to bridge any existing gap that may arise. In a study on help-seeking strategies used by high-achieving and low-achieving distance education students at the Open University of Hong Kong, Taplin et al. (2001) were able to establish that for personal problems, including isolation, self-motivation, test and examination anxiety, friends and fellow students (colleagues) were clearly the most frequently approached for help. In the high achievers' group 43% claimed they spend time with friends and colleagues.

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Since many of distance learners are adult students, Oladokun (2012), in his study of distance learners at the University of Botswana, confirms that these students are usually involved in other major social roles, which is often one of the reasons why such learners opt for distance education. This is in line with the observation of Simpson (2013) when he declares that distance learners *juggling with the demands of work, illness, bereavement and other life experiences, adding that distance students have many calls on their time and energy which must affect their progress*. Distance learners may have full- or part-time jobs, or could be community leaders, (single) parents, etc who hardly live in an information-rich environment. The findings revealed that 280 or 77% of the respondents indicated they were working and 203 (55.8%) were parents and 24 (6.6%) were community leaders. He concludes that the responsibilities and circumstances of such roles might affect their access to and use of information resources either positively or negatively.

In the study of the characteristics of distance learners of the University of Nairobi, Omito and Kembo (2015) confirm that majority of distance learners respondents are adults, aged between 36 and 40; majority 111 (96.5%) of distance learners were employed, most of the learners have some work experience, and most of them, 102 (88.7%), were found to be married. It was also concluded that: distance learners cuts across gender (male and female) almost on equal measure

It has already been established to a large extent, that interpersonal communication and face-to-face interaction in learning group are somewhat eliminated in distance education. Keegan (1999: 8) quotes the German scholar, Peters describing these characteristics as “cultural imperatives for education in East and West”. These traits of face-to-face interpersonal communication as known in the conventional education are now being recreated in distance delivery mode with the virtual or electronic system, in which the Internet or WWW plays an active role. It is evident that distance learners can be found everywhere and anywhere – in metropolitan as well as non-metropolitan areas. Though it may not be detailed enough, Jagroop (2023) appears to make some effort to sum up the characteristics of open and distance learners when he listed the following:

- The learner may be of any age range, from young children to senior citizens. The learner does not necessarily need to be an adult.
- The learner can be a part of several organizations. He or she could be a worker or not, a member of the family, or a student at a formal institution.
- Learning is a part-time secondary activity
- The student assumes the role that he previously had.
- It could be difficult to make contact with their classmates.
- Learners contact with the institute is infrequent, and often takes place across the distance.

Arising from above, Oladokun (2008) raised a number of questions: What knowledge and skills do the learners have? Do they have the ability to use modern ICT? How skilled are they? What information facilities and resources are available to them? As some institutions may want to provide information through digital or electronic means, do the learners have the capability to use the facilities effectively and efficiently if available? How conducive is the environment of the learners to access the needed information? Norris (2001) possibly has remoteness of distance learners and people that engaged in cross-border education in mind when he proposes three types of digital divide. These according to Norris include: social (within countries), global (between countries) and democratic (those unable to use ICTs to take part in public life).

9. LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS

One of the aims to this study is to explore the motivating and strategic means through which distance learners have unfettered access to library and information resources and services in their remote locations. In this section therefore, the practice of library and information services in several parts of the world where ODL takes place shall be reviewed. The views of some authors on the importance of these services in distance learning environment will also be considered.

In a digital era, what form should library service take to ensure that distance learners especially are not marginalized? Lim and Van Dyk (1997) of Monash University in Australia have some experience to share. They affirm that the various components of virtual library service model established enables users to search the Library's online public access catalogue (OPAC), renew loans, place holds on items out on loan, display digitised images of the e-reserve collection, request inter-campus or inter-library loans, make requests directly to commercial document delivery services and access a range of online databases. In addition, through the Monash Library Home Page, students can access a number of journals and Monash library guides and communicate with reference librarians electronically. They avow that users could seek assistance to access the range of information resources provided, whilst the more sophisticated ones are able to bypass librarians to use the information resources directly.

Meacham and Macpherson (1997) writing under the theme, *overcoming the tyranny of distance*, roll out various library and information services which their institution, Charles Sturt University, Australia offered to distance learners of the institution. These include information and reference service, use of other libraries, possibility of students' requests of services by phone, facsimile, post or e-mail. Toll-free phones and after-hours answering facilities are also provided. Other services include reciprocal

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arrangements among three university libraries in Australia which offer distance education support and free photocopy of not more than one article from a single issue of a periodical. While the university pays forward mailing costs, students pay for return of items. Literature searches providing lists of citations are provided to enable students to access materials in the university or other libraries.

At the distance teaching institution of Athabasca University (AU) (2024) in Canada, Library provides Search DISCOVER - the main search tool, where users can access a variety of resources including most of the subscribed journal databases, select open access journals and resources, e-book collections, and books and media. On the website, tutorials and guides are created for the users to assist them to navigate the research process and library designed resources. The library also provides regular webinars focused on orientation to the library, using specific library tools and resources, and on specific subjects. Library Information Desk staff are available to assist with conducting research for assignments, loaning materials from the library's physical collection, and in learning how to use the library's online resources. Users can contact library staff and make requests by email, phone, and chat or by filling out a web form. Library services are also provided through social media such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).

At Virginia College, USA that operates distance learning, *MacDonald* (2010) indicates that Libraries provides both synchronous and asynchronous support with telephone line/live chat and email. A dedicated email address was created for the service, and, during hours of live coverage, turnaround time is generally under five minutes. MacDonald confirms that customers having immediate information needs tend to select one of the synchronous contact methods: telephone or live chat via instant messaging. The distance library service maintains a dedicated telephone number from a cellular service provider. Using the telephone, the librarian attempts to teach learners information literacy skills especially on how to locate information themselves. Described as probably the most innovative and effective approach to offer library support service to distance learners in the new digital era is the application of screencasting software. MacDonald defines a screencast as a digital recording of computer screen output with accompanying customized audio narration. From the range of open source screencasting programmes available, Virginia Libraries select a programme called Jing® which is a freeware version of TechSmith®

In Africa, some encouraging scenario was found in the service to distance learners of African Virtual University (AVU). Kavulya (2004) confirms that AVU library has a digital library consisting of e-journals, e-books and online archives to facilitate access to worldwide resources by students. Though the study confirms that all students obtain user identification, whether they are all able to access the facilities from their various

locations as and when required is another matter. Whilst there is room for improvement at Botswana Open University (2023), library services offered, among others, include email-reference services made through enquiries@staff.bou.ac.bw; Information Literacy training on how to find information easily and speedily offered as per the respective library schedule or by request; and research support. In South Africa is located one of the world's mega distance teaching institutions, University of South Africa. According to Hartzler et.al (1998), the library supplies copies of recommended materials that are usually required to be consulted at specific stages during the course. They point out that the library has built up a large collection of books, known as the Study Collection, to assist in meeting this requirement. In order to meet the information 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. The University of Botswana (UB) operates a dual mode system. Oladokun (2002: 298) observes that the library and information service being developed for distance learners follows the model of UNISA. Operating under the Customers and Extension service unit, the UB Library maintains a small collection of some recommended materials in some regional centres where the students meet for occasional residential sessions. The entire library collection is also accessible through an *opac* system. Further, electronic databases provide references to periodical articles in a wide variety of subjects. It thus means that students with access to the Internet can access some of these databases and indexes, to which the University of Botswana Library subscribes. Such databases include EbscoHost, Emerald and SA ePublications.

10. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is thus far significant to note that open and distance education programmes would need to go along with a well-planned library and information support service to ensure quality and value of learning. Simpson note a group called the Retentioneers believe that students most often drop out because of lack of proactive support. Effective library and information service should be seen as part of the proactive support.

When an institution is planning to establish a distance teaching programme, its library must also prepare and avoid some pitfalls that make some commentators' refer to distance teaching institutions as 'failure factories'. Effective library and information support service will single out the library as an entity that motivates and assists distance learners to learn and succeed. In this respect, the library must boost the

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information environment of distance learners with appropriate resources. It becomes a dilemma for a student to register for a degree programme with glee only to become demotivated and prematurely drop out after wasting a lot of time and resources for reasons of inadequate support from the library. In preparing library and information service for the ODL programme, the following suggestions are offered.

- Distance teaching institution should be acquainted with the spread of their students and ensure adequate opportunities are guaranteed for them to access information resources and services
- The identified librarians who will serve in the outreach unit/section/department should be familiar with what ODL or distance education is about
- The characteristics of the (distance) learners such as described in this paper must be very well known
- Whilst a distance teaching library may be in collaborative partnership with other libraries to assist in serving the learners, the use of information and communication technologies cannot be dispensed with to assist in library service
- In the digital era, the use of ICT, social media and mobile telephony including its functionalities, instant messaging, emailing system, e-literacy skills training, live chat with a librarian etc. are essential and should be applied in getting across to the learners at specified times
- From the range of options and practices described under *Library and Information Services for Distance Learners*, librarians should be able to pick assorted models considered suitable for the learners and the institutions
- In the times of great changes that digital era presents, distance learners librarians should be alert with the emerging technological development and applications and endeavor to adapt and adopt them for the benefit of the ubiquitous learners

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