Libraries Without Walls and Open and Distance Learning in Africa: The Nigerian Experience

Ukoha O. Igwe
National Open University of Nigeria
ukohaigwe@yahoo.co.uk, uigwe@nou.edu.ng

Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is gradually gaining ground in Africa. Even though ODL in Africa is still saddled with teething problems, workers, politicians, school leavers and the general public are trooping into ODL institutions to acquire education.

Nigeria is a new comer in Open and Distance Learning. The experiences of several open and distance learning institutions viz: Open University of United Kingdom (OUUK), Athabasca University (Canada's Open University), Open University of Hong Kong, Indira Gandhi National Open University, (IGNOU), University of South Africa (UNISA), etc have provided a baseline for the take off of the only Open University in Nigeria – the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

Libraries are indispensable in every facet of higher education. Effective library support to distance learners is mandatory for qualitative delivery of instruction and learning. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has transformed all aspects of society particularly information dissemination. The development of libraries without walls has definite benefits to distance learners. Developed and developing countries are creating Virtual learning environments and libraries without walls to reach multitudes of learners at various locations.

This paper examines the general experiences of Open and Distance Learning in Africa, the evolution of ODL in Nigeria and the structure of library services provided to distant learners particularly in Nigeria. It examines the challenges in creating and providing library without walls for distance education and the prospects of library without walls in a developing country like Nigeria. The paper will also present a discussion on how NOUN is developing creative solutions to the challenges.

INTRODUCTION

"Education is widely recognized as central to sustainable economic and social development. African countries, however, face tremendous challenges vis-à-vis other geographies and regions. Rapidly increasing demands for all levels and forms of education, coupled with local and regional governments' limited capacity to expand provision of education through traditional bricks-and-mortar institutions, leaves open and distance learning (ODL) as a viable option to address and match growing demand." Open and distance learning since its introduction in Africa has enabled several countries to provide relatively affordable forms of access to formal education. This in turn raises the basic living standard of Africans in all sectors of the society. ODL is gradually permeating the African continent. It is becoming increasingly an acceptable mode of learning in the delivery of certain specialized courses such as agriculture, healthcare, entrepreneurship training etc. It is being used as a veritable means for reducing poverty levels through the development of human resource capacity. In spite of this, there are challenges facing Open and Distance Learning in Africa.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN AFRICA

Africa has since joined in the pursuit and development of tertiary education through the open and distance learning mode. In 1988, there was only one open university in Africa; today there are four. The higher education landscape of the 21st century is significantly different from that of previous centuries. There are more entrants to higher education today than at any time in the

past. Higher education in Africa has, in fact, evolved from an elitist pursuit into a mass system. The pressure of numbers is one thing that traditional institutions are not equipped to cope with. Their capacities can never be raised to respond to the ever-increasing demand. The only alternative is the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system (Kanwar 2008)

Aderinoye and Siaciwena (2008) observes rightly that in spite of ODL's success in Africa, a number of issues remain to be addressed:

Lack of political support and legitimacy. Lack of understanding about both the potential and limitation of ODL is widespread in many African countries. Harbouring the belief that ODL cannot possibly offer the same quality of education as conventional campus-based education, many educational policy makers and planners remain sceptical about the legitimacy and quality of ODL.

Policy issues: Most African countries lack policies needed to guide the development and implementation of ODL programmes at national and international levels. This has been a major setback to many ODL institutions in Africa. It is an established fact that open and distance learning is successfully sustained where there is clear and unambiguous policy directives governing its application and implementation.

Inadequate capacity: Lack of infrastructure and professional competencies in ODL remain important barriers. In many African countries there is a dire shortage of qualified staff required for guiding and influencing the development of ODL policies and for planning, developing, managing, and evaluating ODL programmes. In addition, most ODL institutions are handcuffed by financial constraints. Several distance learning institutions in Africa were started without adequate provision for funds and many of the institutions grew and expanded so rapidly beyond the available resources, and as a result they have been unable to maintain both the quantity and quality of their services as well as the efficiency of their operations.

Sustainability: Many ODL programmes fail because they are not fully integrated into mainstream education systems. Consequently, ODL programmes tend not to attract the political support required for their successful implementation.

Africa faces huge socio-economic challenges. Moreover, there is an increasing recognition and acceptance that education may be the only way to ensure sustainability of communities and nations as healthy, vibrant and functioning societies and democracies, and for individuals to escape from the viciousness of poverty (Dhanarajan 200).The good news is that there are many successful ODL programmes across the continent and there are efforts underway aimed at addressing the challenges of development. One of these viable efforts is the provision of Library Without Walls (LWW). It was found necessary that an academic resource that cuts across boundaries should be employed to support all the students remotely located across every corner of the country (Ngimwa 2006).

LIBRARIES WITHOUT WALLS IN DEVELOPED ODL INSTITUTIONS

From visits to a number of libraries of open and distance learning institutions in Canada, Hong Kong, and United Kingdom and relevant literature on ODL, innovative approaches in library services are being implemented.

The Open University, United Kingdom established in 1969 has its electronic reference library, ROUTES – Resources for Open University Teachers and Students. This is a database of courses and subjects accessible to staff and students. They also have skills in Accessing, Finding and Reviewing Information (SAFARI) which is a free interactive tutorial to assist students use such tools as databases, online catalogue, the Internet, and identify, evaluate and organize information.

The Open University of Canada, Athabasca has developed the Digital Reading Room, an electronic reserve that provides access to databases and teaching materials from faculties. According to Magusin and Kay (2004) the Digital Reading Room has resources that do not need copyright permission and requests for document delivery and suggested readings are handled from the Digital Reading Room.

The Open University of Hong Kong library provides in-campus facilities and a Remote Access to library resources. OUHK electronic reserve comprises e-journals, indexes and abstracts, dictionaries and encyclopaedias, directories and handbooks, e-news etc. accessed by active students, staff, and part-time tutors. OUHK examination papers, reference materials, electronic theses and dissertations can also be accessed. OUHK library catalogue is available through both web and Telnet but the latter requires Net Term or Simp Term software. (http://www.lib.ouhk.edu.hk/) (Jagannathan 2006)

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) established in 1985 has made remarkable progress in developing library services for distance learners. It has libraries at the regional and study centres and central library at headquarters. However, it has maintained base library operations through computerization using LibSys. IGNOU library is behind in providing access to commercial databases, Internet services and a fully networked environment.

The University of South Africa (UNISA) is one of the first universities to begin distance education as its main focus. It started in 1947. UNISA mode of teaching was mostly that of print based correspondence. Lectures were provided through printed study guides and augmented by recommended textbooks. The UNISA library has developed extensive collections over the years of its existence. Information and communications technology is appropriately integrated in library services.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA

Nigeria with a population of over 120 million people has 80 federal, state and private universities, 54 polytechnics, 67 monotechnics, 72 Colleges of Education, 34 Colleges of Agriculture, 15 Colleges of Health Services and 17 Specialized Institutions (FME 2008). These institutions over the past decade are only able to absorb less than 20% of candidates qualified for higher education. Naturally, the government has been concerned on how to cater for the teeming, vibrant populace who are not absorbed by any of the existing higher institutions. To ameliorate this situation, the Open University of Nigeria was formally established in 1983. This was unilaterally dismantled as speedily as it was established by the then military regime of Gen. Mohammed Buhari in 1984. In many cases distance learning is the only way to achieve the scale, the scope and the impact required to tackle the challenges of education and training faced in Africa (John Daniel 2005). With access to higher education through the traditional higher institutions in Nigeria less than 20%, the reinvigoration of the defunct Open University of Nigeria seems a natural solution. In 2002, the defunct Open University of Nigeria was resuscitated and reactivated to the National Open University of Nigeria. This is the only Open University in Nigeria. There are over 30,000 registered students from all classes of the society. Currently, there are 33 Study Centres across Nigeria. Course materials are centrally produced at the headquarters and dispatched to the Study Centres. Students register, collect course materials, and attend tutorial facilitation at the Study Centres. Each centre is directed by a Manager in the rank of Professor with a retinue of other staff. Registration, assessments, and examinations are carried out at the Study Centres. There are also provisions for library services at every Study Centre.

LIBRARIES WITHOUT WALLS IN NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA – INITIATIVES

Libraries are indispensable institutions in every tertiary education. As Jagannathan (2006) notes that libraries have always been a major focus for all kinds of learning, formal and informal. The library is at the heart of the traditional university or college, providing access to collections,

specialist help support, use of technology and a place to study alone or with fellow students (Watson 2006).

Here, I refer to the elaborate definition of library without walls by Jagannathan (2006) that "libraries without Walls" is a phrase that describes a library without physical infrastructure such as library building, operational sections, reading and stack rooms, circulation counter, furniture, equipment, collections in diverse media, and so on. They are embedded into a virtual library and accessed through Internet from any computer system – desktop or laptop. Advent of ICT has brought about a dramatic transformation in all aspects of education including library and information services. Books are no longer like bricks in the walls of libraries; rather they have got converted into bits and bytes to create libraries without walls. Browning (1993) expressed his own view that books once hoarded in subterranean stacks will be scanned into computers and made available to anyone, anywhere, almost instantly, over high-speed networks . . .instead of fortresses of knowledge, there will be an ocean of information. Implementing this vision transforms libraries from guardians of tradition to catalysts of a vast change. This will dissolve the barriers that separate libraries from their users.

In spite of the low level of technological development in Nigeria, yet technology is enhancing the capacity of library services to be delivered to distance learners. While open and distance education is an effective and versatile means of addressing the problems of human resource development in Africa, an important concern is adequate and appropriate services to support distance students. There is a growing recognition that the provision of good library services is a crucial factor (Watson & Jagannathan 1996). Distance education presents new challenges in information dissemination especially in developing countries. Preparing and presenting library services to open and distance learners in Nigeria invokes unique issues

Technology has given us the opportunity and privilege of creating libraries without walls. Interestingly, this helps to access and utilize learning resources on our palms without physical visit to the four walls of the library. It is axiomatic that the phrase 'libraries without walls' connotes libraries that are not restricted to the physical boundaries of the library building and all the paraphernalia of traditional library services. Libraries without walls (LWW) or virtual libraries can be accessed and utilized wherever there is Internet access. It is no longer news even in developing countries that information and communication technologies have dramatically transformed every segment of society particularly information collection, processing, storage, retrieval and dissemination.

The NOUN library aims at value-added library services to the distance learners. A number of projects have been initiated and are at advanced stage of implementation. The structure of library and information services in NOUN is hybrid. Three centres are being developed with library services: headquarters in Lagos, Abuja office - the Federal Capital Territory and Kaduna Campus in the North Central Nigeria. The hybrid library at the NOUN headquarters has collections in various formats. It has the electronic resources section with high speed Internet facilities and a range of electronic resources and databases. Library services *ab initio* is fully computerized and online catalogue can be accessed by staff and students from anywhere in the world. Small libraries to support distance learners are planned for all the libraries at the Study Centres. These would provide access to various forms of collections to learners, majority of who still suffer from cyberphobia – fear of computers. The plan for the NOUN library is developing a veritable network of libraries with the main library at Lagos, core libraries at Kaduna and Abuja and small libraries at all the Study Centres. The NOUN library is referred to as *Information Gateway* with a virtual information resource unit at Lagos supported with sixty-five fully networked computers with wireless Internet access. Computerization of circulation, cataloguing, serials, multimedia, indexing and abstracting using Liberty3 has been fully achieved.

Information Literacy

User education is a significant component of effective library services. Library instruction is designed to enable library users benefit maximally from library resources and services and inculcate the necessary skills for lifelong learning. For distance education learners, user education is equally important. How do we reach the myriad of distance learners scattered across every corner of Nigeria with information literacy? This is a Herculean task. Online tutorials and multimedia packages accessible on the web and on DVD ROM are evolving for the staff and students of the National Open University of Nigeria.

CHALLENGES

Other major challenges facing the NOUN library in developing library without walls include beside others mentioned above, the following:

i.   lack of trained personnel – lack of knowledgeable dedicated manpower
ii.   paucity of fund
iii.   low capacity infrastructure – Africa is still struggling with fundamental technological challenges such as very limited bandwidth and inadequate IT infrastructure critical to successful exploitation of digital resources (Ngimwa 2006).
iv.   low Internet penetration and access
v.   low perception of the worth and value of libraries
vi.   government's lethargic approach to virtual libraries

FUTURE PLANS

In Sub-Sahara Africa, the National Open University of Nigeria Library aims at being the benchmark for best practice in providing rich and valuable library services to students and staff. We have enthusiastically embraced technology to deliver and improve access to information resources and library services. The library is creating the *Information Gateway Learning Toolkit (INGLET)* which is similar to Deakin Learning Toolkit of Deakin University and SAFARI of Open University of United Kingdom. It is aimed at inculcating information literacy skills and facilitating accessibility to library resources and services. INGLET will have two versions: Online and DVD ROM versions. The DVD ROM version will be distributed free to registered students to be used on their private computers. The toolkit will contain multimedia tutorials to assist learners acquire the necessary skills to explore the Internet, use the Library's electronic databases and e-journals, resources on NOUN library, using Online Public Access catalogue. It will also contain orientation modules and information guides in PDF format, software for staff and students to install and use e.g. Adobe Acrobat Portable Documents Format. It will also contain selected search engines, relevant websites etc. The toolkit will help to reduce barriers in accessing and using library resources and services. It would be a wealth of information and resources to distance learners eliminating the cost and travails of telecommunications requirements.
The NOUN library also contemplates Automated Current Awareness Services/Selective Dissemination of Information.

CONCLUSION

The goal of every university library in Nigeria is to facilitate the realization of the tripartite functions of the university which include: teaching, research and community service. No tertiary institution can exist without adequate library services. The challenge of proving library service to distance learners is enormous. However, technology has provided the impetus to break boundaries and reach the distance learners. In spite of hurdles and barriers, the National Open University of Nigeria is poised to harness the benefits and potentials of developments in information and communication technology to create library without walls – a benchmark and a reference point in Sub-Saharan Africa.

REFERENCES

Aderinoye, Rashid and Siaciwena, Richard (2008) "International Review of Research in Open Distance Learning." In *Trends and Issues in Open and Distance Learning in Africa*, http://www.irrodl.org/miscfiles/call_for_papers_africa.html

Browning, John (1993) "Libraries Without Walls for Books Without Pages: Electronic Libraries and the Information Economy." In On Newstands Now, Issue 1, May/April, http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/1.01/libraries.html

Daniel, John (2005) "Open and Distance Learning in Africa." 15CCEM Mid-Term Review for Africa and Europe, November 14, http://www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/3585

Federal Ministry of Education Statistics (2008), FME, Abuja, p.1

Jagannathan, Neela, (2006) "Library without walls for Distance Learners of South Asian Region: A Dream Far-fetched." The Fourth Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, Jamaica (http://pcf4.dec.uwi.edu/viewpaper.php?id=271)

Kanwar, Asha (2008) "Signs of the Times: Change or be Changed?" Third Convocation of the Tamil Nadu Open University, Chennai, India, January 3, 2008, http://www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/5072

Magusin, Elaine and Kay Johnson (2004) "Collaborating on Electronic Course Reserves to Support Student Success." In *The Eleventh Off-Campus Library Services Conference Proceedings: Scottsdale, Arizona, May 5-7, 2004,* edited by Patrick B. Mahoney. Mount Pleasant, MI: Central Michigan university, pp. 189-195. Reprinted in *Journal of Library Administration Vol. 41, no.1/2, pp.255-264.*

Ngimwa, Pauline (2006) "An African Experience in Providing a Digital Library Service: the African Virtual University Example." *The Fourth Pan Commonwealth forum on Open Learning, Jamaica* http://pcf4.dec.uwi.edu/viewpaer.php?id=196

Watson, Elizabeth F and Jagannathan, Neela (Eds.) (1996). Library Services to Distance Learners in the Commonwealth, Vancouver, B.C., The Commonwealth of Learning, 247p.

Watson, Elizabeth(2006) "Panel Description: Libraries Without Walls." *The Fourth Pan Commonwealth forum on Open Learning*, Jamaica http://pcf4.dec.uwi.edu/viewpaer.php?id=270