

Knowledge and Accessibility of Library Resources and Support Services by Distance Learners: A Study of University of Cape Coast Library

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to determine the knowledge and accessibility of library resources to the distance students in the University of Cape Coast. The study adopted a mixed methodology with the use of both interview guide and questionnaire. It was supported by documentary analysis of 271 data, comprising 270 respondents from the Distance Learners of the Cape Coast centre of College of Distance Education (CoDE), UCC and one Distance Education Librarian. Data for the study were collected between 1st and 22nd February 2019 with the help of a colleague. Some major findings are as follows: Distance learners generally appreciate the services and support libraries offer, but the scope of service accessibility is limited mainly due to lack of awareness. Also, so far, the library's effort is not good enough as far as distance user awareness of library services and practicality of information literacy instruction for distance learners in the University are concerned. The study is limited to the Cape Coast centre of the College of Distance Education only, excluding the postgraduate students. The following are the implications of the study: Firstly, the library must increase efforts to make itself visible enough to distance learners. This will help distance learners who enrol in academic programmes to graduate from the school after tapping into the library resources. Secondly, the library should be dynamic and respond to the specific needs of distance learners and also connect directly with faculties involved in the distance programme.

Keywords: Library resources, Library support, Support Services, Distance education, Distance learners, College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast

Introduction

Quality library service provision to students who pursue distance education in tertiary institutions is indisputably one of the greatest thought-provoking and demanding expansions that has transpired in present-day librarianship.

Library services provision to distance learners has become relevant because of the increase demand for distance education to satisfy personal and national educational goals.

Distance education has positively affected the discipline of education, as well as the services and professions that support distance learning and distance education (Gossenheimer et al., 2017). The impact and significance of distance education are described by Howard (1995) when she states that “distance education has led to a redefinition of what is common in education”. Professional services like information provision, which are supplementary to distance education, have also experienced changes, and the challenge is for academic libraries to create working models that are both economically and technologically sustainable to support these students.

Services offered by an academic library system should support students and faculty, irrespective of their settings and proximity, to address explicatively the needs of instruction, scholarship and research. Academic institutions, including the University of Cape Coast, view and organise distance education differently, according to their academic missions and vision. Nevertheless, the library's support for the distant learners must respond to the mission of the parent institution and the information needs of the students and lecturers.

Distance education brings out both: a number of challenges and opportunities for academic libraries. Challenges create various prospects for information professionals in terms of collaboration, research, benchmarking, restructuring and the like. They also present librarians with opportunities to look into all the services they offer to their off-campus or distant students, as well as all teaching staff and on-campus students. Distance learning

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has now become very significant all around the world in contemporary educational development as an alternative way to meet the huge unmet demand for education, especially at the tertiary level, and an effective library services provision has the potential to address most of the information-seeking challenges that distance learners encounter during their study, which sometimes leads to poor academic performance and withdrawal.

Overview of College of Continue Education (CoDE), University of Cape Coast

University of Cape Coast, College of Distance Education, was commissioned in 1997 as a Centre for Continuing Education and upgraded to a college status on 1st August 2014. The College can currently boast of three academic departments, namely: Mathematics and Science, Business Studies and Education studies.

College of Distance Education (CoDE) was instituted with the aims of providing opportunities for people to pursue university education; train more qualified teachers for all levels of Education in Ghana Education Service; and raise the expertise and competence of serving teachers and personnel of the Ghana Education Service and accounting and management workforce in the public and private sector, commerce and industries. They also intended at providing opportunities for university aspirants qualify for admission but fail to enter the regular University mainstream, due to constraints in physical, structural and geographical facilities.

The Centre started full operation in 2001 academic year with a student population of 750. The Center started with nine learning Centers in nine regions in Ghana, the mode of instruction has and still print-based. The modules used by the distance education students are written by the lecturers from the “main university stream”, and they also regulate tuitions, assessments and other students’ curricula activities.

Presently, University of Cape Coast, CoDE offers Diploma, Post-diploma and Master’s degree in Education and Business programmes. The college operates in 69 learning centres across all the regions in Ghana. CoDE offers 27 specific programmes in Education, Business, Science, Tourism and Hospitality Management. The 2017/2018 Academic Year registered 49,113 undergraduate and 1,548 post-graduate students in all the 27 programmes run

by the College (Vice-Chancellor’s Annual report, 2017).

Statement Of The Problem

The University of Cape Coast is one of the accredited institutions in Ghana, offering distance education programmes as an alternative way to meet the huge unmet demand for education at the tertiary level (University of Cape Coast website; <https://www.ucc.edu.gh>). The resources for acquiring knowledge in any institution belong to all students irrespective of their geographical location on or off-campus. These resources comprise the availability of, and access to, course tutors or facilitators, learning materials, library facilities, etc. Among these resources, the role of the Library is very significant. The Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 1998) reiterate that “Members of the distance learning community are entitled to library services and resources equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus settings”. In addition to accreditation requirements, Lippincot, Vedanthan & Duckett (2014) suggests that library support to distance learners is also vital because academic libraries can stimulate and support innovation in pedagogy and curriculum for higher education through their facilities, technologies, services and staff expertise.

Although Distance Education in the University of Cape Coast has been operational for over 10 years, the distance students have not fully enjoyed the many services that are provided by the University of Cape Coast Library system. This is evidenced by the relatively low patronage of the library by the numerous distance students. Most of these students depend solely on their course modules and facilitators to provide their learning materials and resources to pursue their programmes. Careful observation has proven that their information needs for their research work, examination and the demands on the job market is more than what is given to them in their modules. A healthy support of the library system is therefore imperative for distance students at the University of Cape Coast.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to determine the knowledge and accessibility of library resources to the distance students in the University of Cape Coast. It is also hoped that this

study will be used as a basic step for a further and detailed research study into the provision of library services to the distance students, and recommend solutions based on the findings.

Goals of the Study

The goals of the study are to look at information provision services distance education students of the University of Cape Coast.

It specifically seeks to:

- Determine the awareness level and use of library resources and services by distance education students;
- Assess the kinds of library resources and services available to distance students;
- Identify additional resources and services suggested by distance learners in their bid to help them complete their studies; and
- Make recommendations based on the findings.

Literature Review

Distance Education and Factors that have led to Distance Library Services

Roblyer and Edwards (2000) defined distance education as “the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance”.

The Commonwealth of Learning also defined Distance Education as “the delivery of learning and training to those who are separated mostly by time and space from those who are teaching or training”. The teaching is done with a variety of “mediating process” used to “provide tuition and to conduct assessment or measure outcome”. The distinctive trait of distance education from other forms of education is the “physical separation” that exists between the students, their tutors and the institution of instruction (COL 2003, Global)

Keegan (1998) based on his anticipation for growth, and incorporation of mobile technologies and internet into distance learning by the year 2000, classified distance learning into a group-based and individual-based systems or modes.

According to Keegan, group-based distance education and training usually link the teacher and the learners in several geographic locations by mobile technologies to a system of distant teaching space. Individual-based distance education, however, comes with a major characteristic of distance study materials prepared by tutors for a specific group of students, as well as students support structures for students learning independently and remotely.

University of Cape Coast distance education system can best be described as an individual-based mode per the classification of Keegan, though the course tutors and facilitators meet their students in their study centres occasionally to check on the learning progress of students. It is the factor of “distance” and the need for student support systems that review the role of libraries in distance education. In a typical conventional library service delivery, users enter the library’s physical premises and access the available information services that they need to satisfy their learning needs. In distance education, however, a combination of modalities have to be used to take library services to distance learners (Mortera-Gutiérrez, 2006).

Distance Education in the University of Cape Coast

The growing demand for higher education coupled with other challenges like – insufficient residential facilities, lack of infrastructure and logistics, among others – have made it imperative to provide post-secondary education through distance learning mode (Gupta, 2003).

These challenges have urged many tertiary institutions in Ghana including the University of Cape Coast to offer distance education to help meet the educational needs of the country.

The University of Cape Coast was authorised “to identify the nation’s educational needs and address them specifically by providing trained and qualified personnel for the education sector”. The vision of the University is to be a University that is strongly positioned, with a world-wide acclaim. The mission is to be an equal opportunity university uniquely placed to provide a quality education through the provision of comprehensive, liberal and professional programmes that challenge learners to be creative, innovative and morally responsible citizens. The University of Cape Coast constantly seeks alternative

ways to respond to changing needs of education, it is in line with this that the university introduced the distance education programme in the early 1990s to cater for the educational needs of students who could not get access to the conventional on-campus education. Through distance learning, it also outspreads the skills and services to train experts for education and commercial enterprises.

Library Services at the University of Cape Coast

University of Cape Coast library provides a comprehensive service for the teaching and non-teaching staff, students registered to study from the bachelor's degree level to the doctorate level and selected members of the public interested in their services. The main objective of the library is to support teaching, learning and research. The library achieves its aims by collecting, processing, organising, preserving and disseminating information resources in both print and electronic format and other scholarly articles in subscribed databases. The library also extends its services to the "sandwich" students. The distance education students are now the focus of the library and efforts are being made by the library to reach out to meet their information needs.

Awareness and Use of Library Resources and Services by Distance Students

Tait (2003) stated that, though it may be difficult to label a simple causal relationship between learner supports and student success, the support services encourage the cognitive (learning) development of students. Furthermore, it enhances the self-esteem of students thereby building their confidence. Support services also provide the systematic help students need to meet the required standard expected of them so that they do not fall short or withdraw from their studies. The library is an important support centre with services needed for individuals' academic growth.

Academic libraries acquire and disseminate resources to support research, teaching and learning, but users need to be aware of the existences of the support services offered by libraries in their institutions before they can utilise them. Kavulya (2004) revealed that most distance students have little or no exposure to the library and library resources, a challenge that affects their access to,

and use library resources. Brooke (2011) also revealed in his study in UK University (Sheffield Hallam University-SHU) that, one of the reasons distance learners are not utilising library resources effectively is lack of knowledge of the services available to them.

Library Resources and Support Available to Distance Students

Library support is an essential part of quality education and a central service that should be accessible by all students, whether on-campus or off-campus (Diaz, 2012). Libraries have along with history of delivering information services to patrons within their locations and beyond. Traditionally, librarians and libraries have been responsible for providing all the information needs of students, faculty and other staff on campus. They also guide clients to get appropriate learning materials to complement notes, build library collections to support syllabus for degree programmes, act as curators of archival materials, enhance access to information through inter-library loan, and increase information literacy by training students in the effective use of libraries through bibliographic instruction (Agyen-Gyasi, Lamptey & Frempong, 2010).

The responses of colleges and universities to the need for distance education have expanded the roles and responsibilities of academic librarians. American Library Association (ALA) recognised in 1931 that distance learning students were at a disadvantage educationally because they have limited access to library resources and support. In 1998, the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and ALA approved the third revised ACRL guidelines for distance learning library service and highlighted that, "Library resources and services in institution of higher education must meet the needs of all their faculty, students and academic support staff, wherever these individuals are located, whether on a main campus or off campus, in distance education or extended campus programmes or in the absence of a campus at all, in courses taken for credit or interest, in continuing education programmes, in courses attended in person by means of electronic transmission or any other means of Distance Education".

To fulfil the ACRL requirements of providing "equivalent" resources to distance learners, academic libraries must provide "equivalent" library collections and services to

distance learners as to on-campus learners. Since distance learners cannot come to the library often, library resources and services must be delivered to them, electronically or through other means. The introduction of electronic connections and inter-library support now makes it possible for the current and needed information to be delivered to clients who may not set foot in the physical library building or the institutions the information is generated.

Historically, librarians have sought to provide services equivalent to on-campus learners as to distance learners. These aspirations are based on two philosophical frameworks namely, “Canadian Library Association’s Guidelines for Library Support of Distance and Distributed Learning in Canada (2000) and the Association of College and Research Libraries Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services (2000)”. These guiding principles establish that distance learners do not often have direct access to the most library support and resources due to proximity. The objective of fairness, however, makes it obligatory for librarians to offer a more “personalised” services that can be modified to meet the needs of the distance learners. This brings about issues on distance library support such as: how to improve distance learners access to library collections and support, improve the relationship of the library to its clients and other stakeholders for the benefit of distance learners.

Getting easy access to library services is essential to distance learners notwithstanding the self-study materials and modules given to them. Simons, Beaumont & Holland (2018) indicated that students who study by distance desire to feel like “real students” and using the library is seen as a significant element of the real learning experience for every student. Students need to go “outside” the supplied study modules in order to build up their exploratory skills and have enough subject matter capabilities (Moylan, Gallagher, & Heagney, 2016). Providing library support for distance students and facilitators should be shared essential responsibility that resides with all stakeholders of the academic institution offering courses or programmes via distance. This is because students and faculty within the “distance learning environments” are equally entitled to all services and resources available to students and faculty within conventional campus environments.

Library circulation services, interlibrary loans, reserving course materials, an information desk, reference and

help desk, and library orientation are some of the conventionally ways libraries have served their users or connected to their institutions over the years. Through computer networks and communication technologies, librarians provide distant access and electronic delivery of library resources, reference services and instructional support to distance learners and other remote clients. Many academic libraries have also created Web-accessible virtual or electronic libraries to reach their remote clients. These libraries have online public access catalogues (OPACs) that direct users to their collections.

Remote access to databases with citations, abstracts or full-text of journal articles, books and reference works, interlibrary loan and document delivery services, remote reference assistance via chat, email, or telephone and Web tutorials for library instructions are all possible means of reaching to distance learners through networks and the internet.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methodology. The population of the study was the distance learners of the Cape Coast centre of College of Distance Education, UCC. This is made up of 479 level 100 students, 871 level 200 students, 622 level 300 students, 698 level 400 students, one postgraduate student and 717 re-sit students summing up to 3,388 students for all the departments.

Krejcie and Morgan (1970) indicated that for a population of about 3,500, the sample size of 346 is required to obtain adequate confidence. The sample size of the population was, therefore, 346.

The convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used for the study. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Shuttleworth, 2009). Purposive sampling was used to select the Distance Education Librarian based on the judgement of the researcher regarding the characteristics of the sample. This study adopted the use of both the interview guide and questionnaire to collect data from respondents. Out of the 346 questionnaires, 271 representing 78.3% were successfully collected between 1st and 22nd February, 2019. The questionnaires were self-administered with the help of a colleague, and the SPSS version 22.0 was used to analyse the data.

Results and Discussion

The background information sought from respondents was their programme of study or department, and their level reached. Table 1.1 and Figure 1.1 below indicate the results obtained from respondents under the three main departments from the College of Distance education, University of Cape Coast Center.

Table 1: Academic Departments and Total Number of Respondents

Academic Department	Number of Respondent	Percentage
Education Studies	145	53.51%
Business studies	101	37.27%
Mathematics and Science	24	8.89%
Total	270	99.67%

Field Report: 2019

From the results obtained, 145 respondents were pursuing various Education programmes, 101 respondents were pursuing Business programmes while 24 respondents were pursuing Science programmes. One distance education librarian (0.37%) of total respondents from the University of Cape Coast Library was also interviewed.

The study also gathered data with regards to level or year reached by respondents. The result is represented by Table 1.2 below.

Table 2: Level of Respondents

Level of student	Number of respondents	Percentage
100	9	3.33%
200	115	42.59%
300	98	36.30%
400	48	17.78%
Total	270	100%

Field Report: 2019

From Table 1.2, 115 respondents representing (42.44%) are second year or level 200 students. Ninety eight respondents representing (36.16%) were third year or level 300 students, 48 respondents representing (17.71%) are level 400 or fourth year students while nine respondents (3.32%) are first year or level 100 students.

Awareness and Accessibility of Library Resources and Services by Distance Students

The study sought to find out the awareness of and accessibility of library resources by distance students in the University. The findings as shown by Figure 1.1 below revealed that 153 (56.46%), representing a majority of the respondents, are aware or have knowledge of selected library services (reference assistance, information literacy skills and social media services) available from the University of Cape Coast Library System to students in general. A significant number of respondents 90 (33.21%), however, indicated that they have no knowledge of any library services accessible to students in the university library 27 (9.96%) were not sure of the availability of any library service to students.

Out of the 153 respondents who have knowledge of the existences of library services to students, only 42, representing just 15.50% of the total respondents, indicated that they are aware of the availability of library services to distance students of the University. This points to the fact that most distance students of the University of Cape Coast are ignorant of the services and support the library can offer them in pursuit of their respective academic programmes.

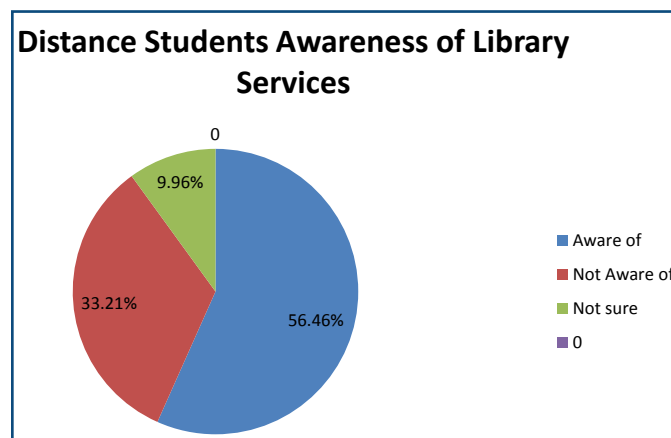


Fig. 1: Awareness and Accessibility of Library Resources and Services by Distance Students

Accessibility of Library Resources to Distance Students

Access to library support and services is important to all students irrespective of distance

and proximity or the availability of course study resources. As pointed out by Unwind (1994), distance students' view their ability to use the library as a component of a complete educational experience. Students need to go further than their provided course modules to be able to expand their analytical skill and have sufficient knowledge in all their subject matter.

Figure 1.2 below represents results from this study. The study discovered that most distance students, 269 (99.63%) find all listed library services needful to complement their studies.

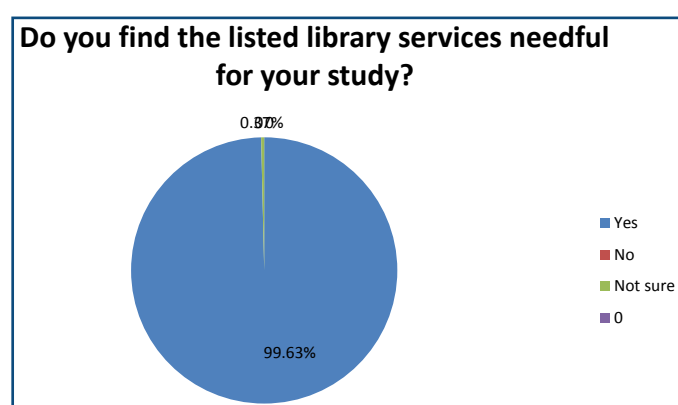


Fig. 2: Usefulness of Library Services to Distance Students

However, majority of the respondents, more than 90%, indicated that they have never accessed or used any of the listed (reference assistance, Ask a librarian chat, Lending services, Inter-library lending and document delivery, Library orientation, E-databases, OPAC, Social media services and Consultation services through email, etc.) library services and support available to them. Respondents stressed that to them these services are not accessible enough.

This disclosure confirms the earlier attestation from the study that most distance students of the university of Cape Coast are not aware of the library services available to them. An earlier observation by Brooke (2011); Owusu-Ansah and Bubuama (2015) also pointed out that lack of awareness for library resources and services seems to be a great challenge to accessing library resources by distance students. Though 48 (17.71%) of the respondents stated that they are aware and have benefitted from the information literacy service which is offered as an academic course required of them, as pointed out by Ranganadham and Babu (2012), the library exists not

only to help the instructional functions of the university but also does a good deal in support of research and help students by providing textbooks, reference books, periodicals and other materials. In a nutshell, the library exists to provide a large number of bibliographical tools and up-to-date literature on every subject for users, as well as maintain efficient reference and information service including e-resources.

Providing library support for distance learners in any institution should be a collaborative responsibility for all stakeholders involved in providing distance education to students. The 1998 revision of the ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services clearly states that "Library resources and services in institutions of higher education must meet the needs of all their faculty, students and academic support staff, wherever these individuals are located, whether on a main campus, off campus, in distance education or extended campus programs, or in the absence of campus at all" (ACRL, 1998).

One respondent made a sad remark that "CoDE and the library has not been fair to us, I believe most of us don't know anything about these services and support to us, awareness should be intensified." Efforts must, therefore, be made so that distance students can access library services and support when, where and how they choose. This implies that all stakeholders involved providing distance education within the institution, including librarians must be reactive and creative enough to meet the library and information needs of their distance students, since most of these students will prefer accessing the library's support and services conveniently at homes and offices as indicated by the respondents, 153 (56.46%) in this study.

Library Resources and Support Available to Distance Students

How libraries provide support services and resources to distance students may vary widely depending on human resource, facilities and resources employed by the individual libraries. In this study, the distance education librarian exposed that providing services to the distance students is a recent development by the library, librarians in charge have therefore taken the initial awareness step by travelling to various study centres, where they met first-year students face-to-face during orientations sections and interacted with them. Lecture on library resources and services are also included in the information literacy module for the students.

An observation also revealed that the Library has a website <http://erl.ucc.edu.gh>, which is available 24/7, all things being equal. Users can, therefore, access services and resources from the library website. Books and other resources at the main and satellite campus libraries are listed in the library's catalogue, so from the catalogue one can see and access holdings of the library with an indication of which library has the item. The OPAC is internet-based and can, therefore, be accessed of the campus by interested clients. The University of Cape Coast library also subscribes to an extensive collection of e-resources comprising academic databases, E-Books, Open access resources and Massive open online course, which distance students can take advantage of.

The School of Graduate Studies in collaboration with the university library organises seminars on E-learning each academic year for all first-year postgraduate students. This is done periodically to encourage postgraduate students to make use of the E-resources available. This support service can as well be extended to the distance of postgraduate students. The University of Cape Coast library, in addition, has an institutional repository which contains electronic formats of Masters and Doctoral theses of past students and a collection of the University's publication and research articles for reference purposes. Just like on-campus students, distance learners are given user name and password to access the library's databases through their website. Support librarians are also available to assist clients when the needs arise.

Additional Support Required by Distance Users of the Library

Informal interaction with a faculty member of distance education revealed that *“teaching staff can be a great motivation for students accessing library resources, the library can thus develop resources aimed at faculty to suggest tips and techniques for making successful assignments that relate to information literacy skills. These assignments will make the course more practical and force students to relate with the library for support”*.

Respondent were asked to indicate additional resources and support they desire from the library. One respondent stated that *“we're on campus on only weekends but we*

want to be able to borrow from the library, but we are limited by time, we should get a satellite library in our centers, so that the library will be closer to us”. Another respondent added *“I went to the library once and didn't feel welcomed, we need to have our library at our center period”*. Fifty-three (19.56%) of the respondents remarked that they would want to the library to keep records of past questions and make it accessible to them on request.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Distance learners generally appreciate the services and support libraries offer, but the scope of service accessibility is limited mainly due to lack of awareness. In order to create and sustain awareness of the diverse range of services available to distance learners, the University of Cape Coast library must proactively communicate with distance learners, and work to make connections with students and faculty directly involved in distance programmes.

Findings of this study suggest that the library's effort is so far not good enough as far as user awareness of library services and practicality of information literacy instruction for distance learners in the University are concerned. The library must, therefore, increase efforts to make itself visible enough to prevent distance learners who enrol in academic programmes graduate from the school without tapping into the library resources.

As part of their awareness campaign, librarians can email notices to faculties involved in distance education courses. Also, the provision of printed or e-brochure to tutors and students to alert them of library services will be an advantage.

Once aware of the range of material and the corresponding services available to their distance students, tutors and facilitators can develop practical assignments that can allow students to explore resources beyond their given modules; librarians should, therefore, create awareness of their services among faculty members just as they make an effort to create awareness among student.

Awareness creation among distance students should be an ongoing process. This will keep on reminding the students of the readiness of the library to offer them the much-needed support in their educational pursuits.

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