

Venturing Cooperation between Alpha University College (AUC) Library and Resource Centers of College of Distance Studies

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Abstract

As one means of creating wider access to individuals who for various reasons are unable to be enrolled in the traditional, face-to-face programs, distance education has become a well-established approach to pursue education in their respective interest areas for adults. A quick glimpse at the history of distance education in Ethiopia vis-à-vis institutions engaged in the sector provides us with the fact that private higher education has taken a leading role despite facing unlimited challenges in the sector. Commencing a distance education programme requires commitment from all stakeholders' side to make it a success. Especially, providing dependable student support for students enrolled in the distance education programme of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) can be taken as a strong challenge as it requires huge amount of resources. As one of the components of student services, provision of library services for distance learners by instituting resource centers to provide library and other services by targeting proximity is evident in the provision of distance education. In the light of providing such services in Alpha University College, different resource centers are put in place to reach the students in their respective locations. Close look at such centers revealed that there are some degrees of similarities in the resources that are housed and services provided in the centers with Alpha University College Library. Nevertheless, irrespective of the similarities, there has never been a formal agreement in boosting the capacities of the resource centers to provide quality services and ultimately improve the delivery of distance education in AUC. Therefore, this research was undertaken to Identify possible cooperation and collaboration areas between the distance education resource centers and Alpha University College Library. Specifically attempt has been made to respond to such research questions as “what mechanisms are used to acquire resources at the resource centers?”~ “how resources are organized in the resource centers?”~ “how users are made aware of the existence of resources and services in the resource centers?”~ “what is the level of adequacy and ICT utilization in the centers?” and “what are the immediate collaboration areas between the resource centers and UC library?”. In order to respond to the above research questions, literature review, interview and review of such professional networks as Consortium of Ethiopian Academic and Research Libraries (CEARL) were uses as methodologies. Major findings of the research are: absence of collection development policy; lack of collaboration on the collection development of the resource centers; formal resource discovery tools are missing; user education/information literacy is non-existent; ICT related content and services are extremely weak; services provided for distance learners are very limited and formal agreement with similar nearby institution is lacking. Based on the major findings future cooperation and collaboration areas are provided.

Keywords: *distance education, student support centers, academic libraries, library services for distance learners, consortia*

Background

The inception of distance education is aligned with the assumption to provide education for all. It is realized by making the concept of distance bleak and reaches students anytime and anyplace making them life-long learners (Muswazi, 2003). One of the critical challenge that distance education addresses is obsolescence of skills in any profession. Nevertheless distance education does not exist without challenges and it requires a number of inputs to make the dreams of the students and the service providers real. With the advent of ICT the delivery of distance education has been more facilitated (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013). In addition, for efficient delivery of distance education, student support centers are mandatory whether traditional or technology based (Brooke, 2011). Student support centers are one of the key enablers in maintaining quality in the delivery of distance education. Basically, they exist to augment the delivery of education in distance to bridge the identified gap when distance education is compared with the face-to-face (ACRL, 2008). In the student support service category we can find delivery of library services for distance learners. Such kind of services must be properly managed and guided by standard principles (ACRL, 2008).

Statement of the problem

Quality of education in distance mode is a factor of the resources and services that are made available for students. One of the resources provided for distance students are library and information resources constituting both print and digital. Such resources are provided using academic libraries of the service providers (Brooke et al, 2013; ACRL, 2008). When, the resources are meager, by venturing partnership, efforts will be made to provide the service in collaboration with similar service providers (Abdelrahman, 2012). One of the support center diligently working in smoothening the life of distance learners in Alpha University College is resource centers located at different branches and coordinating centers. When one a close look at such a center, there is high degree of similarity with regard to the collection and the service these centers are providing with the academic libraries. However, despite the resource centers and libraries belong to the same institution, the level of cooperation in addressing specifically distance students need has been found to be extremely weak.

Objective

The general objective of the research is Identification of possible cooperation and collaboration areas between the distance education resource centers and Alpha University College Library.

Research questions

Attempts have been made to respond to the following research questions:

- What mechanisms are used to acquire resources at the resource centers?
- How resources are organized in the resource centers?
- How users are made aware of the existence of resources and services in the resource centers?
- What is the level of adequacy and ICT utilization in the centers
- What are the immediate collaboration areas between the resource centers and AUC library?

Methodology

The research employed review of literature, qualitative survey and review of experiences of CEARL in order to address the above research questions:

Review of literature

Pertinent literatures have been reviewed in order to develop guidelines for the interview (Brooke et al, 2013; Brooke, 2011, etc.)

Review of current partnership engagements of AUC library (Consortium of Ethiopian Academic and Research Libraries (CEARL))

Available partnership experiences in CEARL were consulted in order to identify possible cooperation areas that AUC can venture in order to diversify library services for distance learners.

Qualitative survey

At present AUC is providing education for distance learners through its 14 branches and more than 41 coordinating centers. All the branches and coordinating centers have resources centers to provide services. Among these, Interview was conducted with Vice President for CDS ,selected branch managers and coordinators (Mekelle, Gonder, Adama, Hawassa, Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Nekemt)

Literature review

It has become a common place that for human being to make most benefit out of his/her surroundings, education is one of the best ways out. The best testimony for such kind of general truth is that the kind of educational establishments and investments being made by developed nations and the one that belong to the emerging economy (Brooke, 2011). Nevertheless, due to the requirements stipulated in order to provide access to education for all, nations have been challenged to reach its citizen to make them educated (Shimelis, 2012). One of the modalities that helped nations to address the issue of access to education for all is distance mode of education or e-learning (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Wheeler, 2002). Distance education that has come out of a limitation of what we call traditional mode of education where instructor and learners have opportunities to interact each other is not only famous for to provide education at learners convenient time and space by making geographical boundary bleak, but it is famous also to address the obsolescence of skills within shortest time possible in any profession. Within the reach of distance education or e-learning, one of the prime advantage is making students life-long learners by equipping them with the necessary knowledge, attitude and skills to enable them re-learn, unlearn and to be in the track of the unreserved quest for knowledge professionally, socially and spiritually (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Muswazi, 2014; Brooke, 2011). However, in order for students become life-long learners, any kind of distance education institutions are expected to put in place Student Support System (Brooke, 2011). Based on these premises, this literature review has been organized to present brief overview of SSS; provision of library services for distance students; provision of library resources and services through consortia and issues in delivering library services for distance learners.

Student support service

Absence of face to face interaction has been one of the much touted limitations of distance education and in the light of addressing such a challenge, student support services have come of the fore. Student support services are services that include but are not limited to tutorial, counselling, library service and so on (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013, R2). Authorities contend that SSS are one of the enabling factors for higher learning institutions to maintain quality in the delivery of distance education (source). Therefore, the degree and magnitude of institutional commitment to put in place an effective SSS is a measure of the extent that service providers of the distance education delivery institutions (source).

Library services

One of the key quality maintaining issues in the delivery of distance education is the provision of library services at students convenient time and place and this issue will be treated in the section to follow.

Library services for distance learners

Much has been said about the importance of library services for any kind of especially higher learning institutions with ever evolving model (Kwanya et al. ,2012; Abdelrahman, 2012, Brooke, 2011). The same is also true that authorities came into the agreement that without a well-established library in terms of resources and services, the quality of education in the distance realm will be challenged (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Rodman and Prior,2003; Muswazi, 2014). In this regard, there are a well-established standards available world-wide stating how libraries are organized to deliver services for distance learners in terms of organizational structure, professional staff allocations, budget, content, utilization of technology, user education/information literacy, etc. (ACRL, 2008). When one takes a look at the way libraries are organized for its respective users be it traditional or distance, it must have a capacity to provide content, infrastructure, technology, knowledge management tools, and create forums to make its user life-long learners.

Content

Content provision in the distance delivery mode must address curriculum, research and recreational needs of distance learners (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Muswazi, 2014). When a distance program is launched, stakeholders are expected to make sure that there are adequate resources and associated services for students pertinent to the existing needs of students, faculty, tutors and others as well as future expansion of the programs (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Muswazi, 2014). With the advent of ICT, the content must strike balance regarding printed as well as digital

formats. Considering the provision of online content, it is mandatory that the content should enable students and the community at large to have access to electronic journals as well as online databases (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Muswazi, 2014; Brooke, 2011).

Infrastructure

Especially the provision of digital content requires to put in place an infrastructure with acceptable level of capacity to entertain the information requirements of the user community of the distance education delivering institution (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Brooke, 2011). In this line, the institution is responsible to avail computers to access resources within its premises, server and systems to create seamless access to its users irrespective of the users' locations (Brooke et al, 2013). On top of these, physical reading areas that address the proximity issues must also be made available. When such premises are made available, the institution through its professionals must ensure that all the required resources and services are readily available (Brooke et al, 2013). As it is mandatory for ensuring quality for the service it provides, when there are limitations in resource and services provision, partnership and cooperation must be ventured to secure services from the nearest location where majority of students are located (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Brooke, 2011).

Technology

As ICTs have become ubiquitous, the distance education deliver institutions are required to champion in the utilization of ICT to reach their students. With the advent of ICT, libraries have gone digital and majority of service and resources are being provided through ICT (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Muswazi, 2014; Kwanya et al., 2012). Therefore, in the light of strengthening SSS, ICT must be part and parcel of the service provision of libraries with in the distance education delivery arena (Wheeler, 2002). As part of ICT, website particularly devoted to entertain the needs of distance learners must be developed and put into effect (Rodman and Prior, 2003).

Knowledge management tools

For the effective channeling of information resource and services in the distance education deliver libraries, proper organization of resources must be observed. In such a case, the libraries or centers that are delegated to act as distance libraries must have proper retrieval tools to enable users and have access to wealth of resources they are housing. In this line, traditional card catalog with acceptable level of access options or Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) must be made available for users (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013). Especially, OPAC is an effective tool to

enable user make aware of the availability as well as accessibility of resources and services for distance learners (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013).

User education/information literacy (IL)

In order to justify return on investment for all birr that an institution invests in the resources and services in the library for distance learners, the first critical issue to be addressed is marketing of library resources and services (Wondimeneh, 2013). Once users are aware of the existence of the resources and services, professional librarians must engage themselves in educating their users to make them life-long learners (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Muswazi, 2014). Information literacy is one of the issues that must be practiced in equipping distance learners the skill of identification of problems (information needs), based on such needs spotting relevant resources, analysing these resources based on their merit, using these resources providing solutions for the problems and finally after going through all the processes adding knowledge in their respective profession (Brooks et al, 2013). Therefore, especially with the distance education realm, professional librarians in collaboration with ICT professionals must create a platform and resource to equip distance students with the necessary IL skills (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013, Brooke, 2011).

Provision of library resources and services through consortia

The ever dwindling budget of libraries and escalating costs of information resources and services in the library and information centers environment has become a formidable challenge (CLA, 2000). In order to address such a challenge library and information centers have ventured cooperation and partnership and established different consortia (Abdelrahman, 2012; Brooke et al, 2013; Rodman and Prior, 2003). These consortia have created an avenue to share content, expertise, infrastructure, etc (source). For instance, by simply chipping in the available resources, library and information centers have boosted their financial capacities and purchased world known databases owned by class publishers (source) and hence increased their purchasing and negotiation power. Similarly, in the light of sharing expertise, capacity building programs have been designed and put in place using institutions with relatively high professional profile (source). In the same vein, consortia have been shortcuts to channel different resources and services for distance learners (source).

Issues in delivering library services for distance learners

Delivering library services for distance learners is not a simple issue. In order for efficient delivery of such a service such critical issues as content, infrastructure, awareness, knowledge management, technology, consortia, information literacy issues

must be properly addressed (Brooke et al, 2013).

Summary of findings

Major findings of the research are presented in this section comprising two components. The first component provides findings of general items compiled and the second one is organized using the research questions as a framework.

General:

Organizational structure and human resource

Review of the organizational structure of AUC revealed that resource centers are organized under the College of Distance Studies (CDS), reporting to the Vice President for CDS, Branch or coordinators at locations where distance students are registered. Further look at the staff composition of the resource centers revealed that staff working in the resource centers are not professionally trained to deliver the required services.

Opening hour and service provided

As a matter of procedures all the surveyed resource centers provide service during the opening hours Alpha University College: Monday-Friday (Office hours) and Saturday morning.

Services provided by the resource centers include spot reading (allowing students to borrow resources for a specified time period within the premises of the resources center; allowing students to view and browse CD-ROM contents using the available PC, and browsing internet connection.

Major findings vis-à-vis research questions posed

What mechanisms are used to acquire resources at the resource centers?

In the light of collection development of the resource centers, resources are selected and sent to resource centers from Associate VP CDS. Sometimes when there are excess copies of resources from libraries few copies are sent to the resource centers through VP CDS.

It has been found that there is absence of budget for acquisitions of resources in each fiscal year. Relevant collection for the resource centres can be build with sound collaboration of faculty, tutor and all stakeholders. Nevertheless, such collaboration is missing in acquisitions of resources in the centers.

How resources are organized in the resource centers?

Effective retrieval of resources in the centers can be achieved when provided information resource organization tools are provided. In response to these questions, it has been learnt that lists for resources acquired in the resource centers are prepared and made available for students. There is absence of catalogs of resources or Online Public Access Catalog that would help efficient retrieval and thus, resource discovery is problematic.

How users are made aware of the existence of resources and services in the resource centers?

Marketing of information resources and services is important to create maximum utilization of resource in the centers. In response to this question, it has been found that orientation is provided when new students are registered. There is lack of formal awareness creation strategy from the resource centers about the existence of resources and services. Culture of publicizing when new resources have arrived is non-existent. On top of these, resource centers do not have their own website to promote resource and services.

What is the level of adequacy and ICT utilization in the centers

As part of the provision of ICT based services, one PC is made available in the resource center. PCs are used to browse and utilize digital content on CD-ROMs containing e-books .as part of the collection of the resource centers E-journals are found to be missing. In addition, resource centers do not have their own website to make e-journals accessible for users.

Summary of gaps

Based on the major findings presented, attempts have been made to summarize major gaps to be addressed by AUC:

- Absence of collection development policy
- Lack of collaboration on the collection development of the resource centers
- Formal resource discovery tools are missing
- User education/information literacy is non-existent
- ICT related content and services are extremely weak
- Services provided for distance learners are very limited
- Formal agreement with similar nearby institution is lacking

What are the immediate collaboration areas between the resource centers and AUC library?

As a way forward for this research, the following items are identified as potential cooperation areas to be considered by AUC:

- Acquisition of resources for distance learners
- Organization of resource within the resource centers (OPAC)
- Capacity building
- Collection development including digital content
- Design and development of website for the promotion and marketing of content and services
- Design and development of Online Public Access Catalog
- Establishment of partnership with sister institutions
 - Utilization of information resources
 - Printed books (ILL, Photocopy, etc.)
 - Digital content (through consortium, open access)
 - Utilization of physical space
 - From the nearby similar institutions
- User education/information literacy (Mnkeni-Saurombe, 2014)
 - Preparation of online tutorial
- Advisory service
 - While distance students are doing their senior essay
- Intermediary literature search
 - Contents will be sent using email

Conclusion

Cooperation and collaboration is one way of ensuring optimum utilization of resources. Through cooperation and collaboration quality of education can be ensured (Wondimeneh, 2012). Cooperation and collaboration are one of the approaches to tackle shortage of resources in academia. Despite there exist experiences of cooperation and collaboration in different environments, areas of possible cooperation

identified in this research are based on experiences from AUC library. Nevertheless, similar institutions with rich experience must be assessed to boost the cooperation and best practices must be adopted. Future research must also target students, tutors, faculties and experience from similar institutions in Ethiopia.

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