

Accessing library materials in academic libraries by students during the Covid 19 era. A case of an Open and Distance Learning Institution

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Abstract: Covid 19 has restricted the traditional use and access of academic libraries and created the new norm. This has resulted in failure by students to use Library computers, access the internet and communicate with Library personnel to help them access library resources. This study sought to establish how the students were accessing the library and the challenges they were facing thereof. The qualitative study approach was used to gather views of library users while the Department of Information Science students were used as a case study. Sampling was done conveniently, the limitation being the availability of respondents. The study gathered data using the telephone interview method and the website content analysis method was employed. The findings of the study were presented thematically guided by research objectives. It was established that the traditional services of the library were not on offer to users at the moment due to travel restrictions and the curfew imposed as a result of COVID 19. The Library could only be accessed electronically/remotely though only a few students had access to the Library' e-resources. Students lacked knowledge on the availability of e-resources and those who had access to them could not use some of the electronic journals as they either required passwords or were not available. Findings also showed that there were no librarians to respond to requests and questions remotely, making it difficult to navigate through the vast amounts of e-resources. It was also established that some students had challenges such as not having computer gadgets, lack of bandwidth/ internet connectivity and information literacy skills. It was recommended that students are rigorously equipped with information literacy skills and that the content must not be complicated, even phones must be used to access them.

Key terms; Academic Libraries, access, library materials, Covid 19.

I. INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe Open University is an Open and Distance Learning institution that seeks to deliver education to the learner's doorstep. In order to do this, there is need for the essential support services, one of which is the library. An academic library has been viewed as the soul of the university whose main objective is to promote research, disseminate knowledge and inculcate the reading culture and extension services (Joshi 2007). Libraries consist of different collections that are determined by user needs. The academic library collections come in different forms, that is traditional books, periodicals, newspapers and the electronic resources which

comprises of electronic resources and databases. In addition, students have visited libraries for services such as the internet, computer typing services and to get assistance from the librarians on how to access the library resources and query narrowing. In developing countries, the use of electronic resources is limited due to a number of challenges. These according to Akuusha (2015) include lack of knowledge about resources is one of the numerous challenges users face while browsing electronic information, lack of information literacy skills and attitude by users regarding technology. Due to COVID 19, travel restrictions have been imposed by governments as a measure to curb the spread of the virus. Libraries have closed its doors to the public depriving students of the traditional library services, access to library internet and learning spaces. In addition to that, students have been said to lack resources to access the library remotely. As such, this study sought to establish how the Faculty of Information Science and Records management students were accessing library resources despite all these challenges and Covid 19.

Statement of the problem

The prevalence of COVID 19 virus has made physical visits and access to physical information resources of the Libraries and memory institutions impossible as the disease is a contact one and is airborne. This made the researcher wonder how the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences students, who were required to carry out research, write assignments and research projects, were accessing the library during the 2020-2021 semester.

Research objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives;

- To establish how the Faculty of Applied Social Science students were accessing library resources when writing assignments and research projects during the COVID 19 period
- To explore the challenges faced by the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences students when accessing the library resources.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in a qualitative manner aimed at finding out how the library patrons were accessing library

services during the Covid 19 era when researching and writing assignments and research projects. Lloyd-Jones (2003:35) comments that qualitative research “aims to answer the questions related to what, how or why of a phenomenon rather than how many or how much, which are answered by quantitative methods”. This approach was used in this study because of its allowance of the “view of homogeneous exploration; it raises more issues through broad and open-ended inquiry and provides in-depth understanding of behaviours, beliefs and assumptions” (Choy 2014:101). A case study approach was employed in this study focusing on the Department of Information Science and Records Management students at ZOU Bulawayo regional campus. Data was generated using an open ended electronic questionnaire and to ensure trustworthiness, the researcher employed the website content analysis method as a verification method. A sample of 35 Department of Information Science and Records management students which was conveniently selected due to covid 19 travel restrictions. Study findings were presented thematically guided by research objectives with narrative analysis.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID 19 and teaching and learning

In early December 2019, an outbreak of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by a novel severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), occurred in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. On January 30, 2020 the World Health Organization (2020) declared the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

The escalating coronavirus pandemic has brought in a ‘new normal’ with near-universal educational institution’s closure which has affected about 192 countries while impacting 60% of the student’s population which in turn has resulted to significant long term learning losses (UNESCO 2020d). Under COVID 19 emergency conditions, several countries have resorted to remote and distance learning strategies to support home confined learners with learning continuity (Common Wealth of Learning 2020a).

Covid 19 has been identified as disruptive characterized by emergency crisis conditions which has catalised permanent change to global systems and their linkages to education (Taleb 2007). Consistent with this view, the pandemic has challenged neoliberal individualism by fostering a culture of care, compassion and social solidarity and is being seen as a grand experiment in remote learning and working (Winston 2020). This would mean the access of the library services by students despite travel restrictions while at the same time the provisions of library services by academic libraries to meet user needs. This COVID 19 pandemic has thus been seen as a portal between the old and the new world, where seeds of socially just alternatives can be sown, which in this case is remote access to library services (Roy 2020).

Library resources and ways of accessing them

Students have over the years been used to traditional library services whereby they visit the library, borrow books, they are given the date of return and then they visit the library again to return the book. In some cases, the users would inquire from the librarian for help on certain sources of information and get the assistance. Some users would visit the campus library for internet, to use the library computers and for discussions. Materials that have been accessed include books, periodicals, encyclopedias, Past examination papers and maybe newspapers. Accessing these materials required visits in person to the Library to access library services. Print resources include journals, textbooks, magazines, newspapers and reference materials and non-print like CD-ROM, audio-visual materials, micro film, micro fiches, databases, and e-resources are to support assignments, projects work, term papers and seminar presentations by providing relevant information and services for effective and efficient achievement of academic excellent.

Distance education, has however, revolutionised and democratised learning while also changing how critical support services such as library and information services should be provided (Watson 2003). Apart from that, the introduction of ICTs has had the same effect resulting in remote access to library resources. With travel restrictions, closure of libraries and gatherings, the students and libraries users can only access library materials online. The 21st concept of an academic library is driven by scholarly communication, creation of new institutional frameworks and electronic resources as part of the library collection (Roemer & Borchadt, 2015a).

The visible trends of the 21st academic library include patron driven collection development, a largely digital collection, open access electronic resources such as institutional repositories, e-books, new spaces such as information, learning and research commons, and relative dependency on the social web (Facebook, Twitter) for service provision (Afebende, Ma, Mubarak, Torrens, Ferreira, Beasley, Chu & Ford, 2016; Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL), 2010; Chuta, 2015; Jain, 2013; The University of Adelaide report, 2015). Academic libraries are also meant to maintain intellectual stimulation through offering mobile services which include mobile sites, text messaging services, mobile access to databases, the catalogue, chats/IM services, and social media accounts and applications (Li, 2013; Liu & Briggs, 2015; Pease, 2017; Wilders, 2017). Mobile services in academic libraries are facilitated through devices such as smartphones, tablets, e-book readers, laptops, handheld gaming tools and portable music players (Cannel & Crichton, 2011; Elmore & Stephens, 2012).

In the same vein, some university libraries have “reconfigured their physical spaces and redesigned services to meet the new challenges by adopting the idea of the information commons or a central location that provides computers, sockets to

permit the use of mobile devices, information resources in various formats, and staff assistance” (MacWhinnie, 2013:248). The 21st century has led to a call for a “more social approach to academic libraries by installing cafés, expanding group study spaces, and developing information commons” (Gayton, 2008:64). The Zimbabwe University Libraries Consortium (ZULC) has been subscribing to electronic journal databases available through the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI). Talking of the year 2007, ZULC members managed to have access to over 19,500 electronic journals available through the PERI initiative (Tevera&Mlambo, 2007:44). For 2008, each ZULC member paid US\$5,524 whereas annual subscription to one of the most popular journal titles with library patrons at Africa University cost about US\$695.

This has seen access to some of the following journal databases available through PERI:

- i. EBSCO;
- ii. Emerald;
- iii. Wiley-Blackwell;
- iv. Gale Cengage Learning;
- v. Cambridge Journals Online;
- vi. Oxford Journals Online;
- vii. Sage Publications;
- viii. Institute of Physics; and,
- ix. Taylor and Francis.

Furthermore, Cornell University together with the World Health organization (WHO), Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have been spearheading the provision of information on environmental sciences, health sciences and agricultural sciences through the following electronic journal databases: OARE; AGORA; HINARI; and, LANTEEAL (AGORA, 2008). Renowned publishers such as Cambridge University Press and Blackwell have facilitated the availability of some of the books they publish electronically either on CD-ROM or online to libraries. Another notable advantage of the electronic journals has been the availability of online early editions of the print equivalent articles. These initiatives seek to promote access to research information at low cost or subsidized rates to developing countries (INASP, 2008).

Electronic resources are now used more than print resources (Morse and Clintworth, 2000). Their advantages include access to information that might be restricted to the user due to geographical location or finance, access to more current information, and provision of extensive links to additional resources or related content (Dadzie, 2005). Akusah (2015) carried out a survey of the use of ICTs in ten African Public Library Services. The survey found that, although most libraries had internet connectivity, very few were offering web-based information services to their users.

Apart from the available resources, the Library should be in a position to communicate with its patrons. Communication can be face-face or remotely. Watson (2003) notes that consultation can also be conducted remotely through email, toll-free telephone services and through scheduled remote site visits. Doing so keeps the library abreast with the changing information needs and preferences.

Challenges faced by students when accessing the Library remotely

Despite advantages derived from the two main methods of accessing library resources, that is the traditional visits and remote access, there are a number of challenges that students face when accessing library resources. Some of the challenges, especially for distance learners include the aspect of distance to travel to the Library, time [opening and closing hours] and financial challenges associated with efforts to reach the Library.

The other challenges highlighted include lack of subscription in relevant fields of studies resulting in information deficit. Lack of knowledge about e-resources, lack of training, technical problems, internet connectivity challenges, inadequate infrastructure and negative attitudes (Bhatt, Rana 2011, Mishra 2011 and Alison etal 2012). As such the utilization of e-resources is influenced by both the human and institutional factors including low bandwidth and the limited number of resources available to users. Waldman (2003) further state that another obstacle is that electronic resources are not seen as being easily accessible. The author gives an example that the student has to choose a particular database and select specific words they would use to create a query. Lack of ICTs and power outages as well as the absence of in-depth ICT skills were key problems (Oduwole&Akpati2003), Watts and Ibegbulam 2006). In addition, lack of information searching skills and the cost to get internet services are hindrances to the use of electronic resources.

IV. STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Accessing the university Library

It was established that the majority of students were failing to access library resources physically during the Covid 19 era. Students cited travel restrictions as the major reasons for their failure to visit the library and the fear to contract Covid19. Thus visits to the library in person, reference services, use of learning spaces and issuing and returning of books was not happening. In addition to that, students were not able to use the University Library internet services.

In addition, while the other alternative to library access was through electronic resources, users lacked knowledge about journal databases that covered their subjects. One respondent stated

“I have no idea of the e-resources and how to access them. I am used to library visits and using google to get the information I need”

Probed to further elaborate on this, one respondent stated that in the Library is where they have access to the internet, use library computers and even hardcopy books. As such, failure to go to the library means no/very limited access to library materials as they cannot afford expensive data bundles and they did not have laptops/computers at home. Another student, highlighted that she stays in Solusi, where they experience power surges, especially during the rainy season and they go for days if not weeks without electricity. According to Haleh A et al (2009) one of the major non-technical challenges in developing and implementing a successful information system is user acceptance, since users will have to face a change. This was captured in another response obtained showed that students were technophic, with some professing that they were BBC, meaning that they were Born Before Computers and as such if traditional visits to the library were not possible, they had no access to library resources. Asked on how they were writing assignments and doing research, findings showed that they were dependent on modules while others used information from unknown sources which as web pages and Wikipedia which were not authentic. This coincides with sentiments echoed by Eastman and Iyer (2004) that in this information age, some people are suffering from lack of information

These findings further show that users in developing countries still prefer traditional library services and they highly regard hard copy books and visits to the library to meet their information needs. Besides, findings were in agreement with sentiments by Akuusha (2015) that some users lack knowledge about electronic resources. Due to unawareness users ended up using any information they get ahold of without proper evaluation (Ternenge and Kashima 2019). In the same vein, Chisita and Mataranyika (2013) and Chikonzo, Bothma, Kusekwa and Mushongwa (2014) revealed in two separate studies that in Zimbabwe little has been done to contextualize technological developments, making provision and access to e-resources difficult.

While some, especially the elderly displayed their negative attitudes towards the use of e-resources during Covid 19 era, the young, aged between 19- 25, stated that they were relying on the e-resources platform to access library materials. One student stated that it kept them safe at home, while ensuring that they access different journal databases which had current information though they were using smart phones to do so. The young, were enjoying benefits of e-resources such as access to more current information, and provision of extensive links to additional resources or related content (Dadzie, 2005, Akuusah 2015).

Study findings also showed that e-resources were used in assignment writing and research for those doing research projects. On which e-journals they had access to the most, the students showed that Open Access Journals were easily accessible though the fields such as Information Science and records management had limited content. It was thus observed that there is a generational gap with regards to accessing the

Library electronically with the young, techno survey leading the role.

Respondents were asked on how then they communicated with the Library if they had queries or needed assistance when accessing the e-resources. A response by respondent C1 showed that the students could not get immediate responses from the Library as communication channels that were in place include a university e-mail address and a landline number which went unanswered during the lockdown period.

The web analysis observations showed the availability of e-resources that were accessed through the www.zou.ac.zw website. The website had e-resources, e-books, open access content, ZOU catalogue and the ZOU institutional repository. The e-library platform also had contacts to the Library. The institutional repository had 399 articles, while subscribed to 11 e-resources journals which comprised of Wiley Online, Taylor and Francis, Springer and Emerald e-journals amongst others. Regarding e-books, the study established that it had the Directory of Open Access books. This is in line with sentiments echoed by INASP (2008) that there were different e-journals databases at the disposal of Libraries for students to access remotely. While JSTOR electronic journal was easy to access, journals such as Taylor and Francis, Emerald and Wiley Online could not be accessed as they required Log in via institution credentials which students had no access to. Upon accessing the ZOU catalogue, it was established that it was unavailable. This was in line with sentiments echoed by students that accessing most of these electronic resources was difficult. This is in contrast to findings by Tenopiretal (2012) who concluded that users are dependent on the availability of electronic resources to meet academic needs while referring to users in developed countries such as Australia.

Challenges faced by students when accessing the University Library

A number of challenges were pointed out by students regarding access to the library resources during the Covid 19 era chiefly among them being;

- Travel restrictions which meant they could not traditionally visit the library or use learning spaces in the library to access the internet/WIFI
- Data that was expensive for them to access e-resources
- Lack of knowledge about e-resources and journal databases that subscribe to their subjects
- Technophic nature of some learners
- Difficulties in accessing some journal databases on smartphones
- Inadequate resources such as laptops/computers

These were the challenges pointed out by Bhatt, Rana (2011), Mishra (2011) and Alison etal 2012) that there was lack of knowledge about e-resources, lack of training, technical problems, internet connectivity challenges, inadequate

infrastructure and negative attitudes and as such information seekers had hunger despite the abundant information resources electronically.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Paskevicius (2020) stated that nowadays participants use smartphones which require learning institutions to create mobile friendly interactive materials that will ensure that e-resources are accessible even with phones without internet access while at the same time ensure that resources are not difficult to download.
- Furthermore, apart from physical visits, the users can visit the Library remotely and access e-resources which are up-to-date and in abundance regardless of space and time
- Librarians should be more involved in delivering of e-resources through selective dissemination of information by acting as an intermediary, providing searches and retrieval of information on behalf of clients while at the same time doing document delivery through email attachments
- There is need to further train users on information and computer literacy skills to equip them and ensure that they are able to search for authentic information in need.
- There is need to utilise social media such as WhatsApp for instant messaging and to ensure that queries are attended to and programmes to do with selective dissemination of Information are conducted with ease.
- Proper marketing and awareness creation is needed by Libraries so that users are aware of the services offered by the academic libraries hence ensuring full exploitation of e-resources

VI. CONCLUSION

It is imperative that Libraries utilise the advancement in ICTs and improve service delivery. While Covid 19 has been viewed as a barrier in teaching and learning, Librarians must view it as an opportunity to test their e-resources platform, market them widely and enforce the off-campus access to electronic databases and develop the culture of embracing and using technology when accessing library resources amongst its users.

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