Mobile Phones to the rescue of Distance Learners: Democratizing access to OERs through Public Libraries

Issue at-hand

As the key depositories of knowledge in towns, schools and universities, libraries play a very important role in promoting a literate and intellectual environment in society. They are an indispensable link between learning in formal, informal and non-formal settings and opportunities for further learning or lifelong learning by making available an array of books and learning materials across the gamut of subject areas. Without them it is difficult to create a learning society. Within universities they play an even more crucial role as they are the nexus between the fundamental missions of academia of learning and research.

However, libraries in Africa, both public and school or university-based, are confronted with a difficult policy environment as they are not always seen as a key priority and therefore do not receive the resources and attention they deserve. As a result, they are poorly resourced in reading materials such as books and multimedia learning platforms that one can find in more developed contexts. In universities, where they are supposed to be the center of academic scholarship, funding is lacking for the acquisition of scholarly journals in all subject areas and in sufficient quantity. Also lacking is the state-of-the-art research material such as computers and internet connection of good quality to access and download information from databases the world over. Moreover, with the rapid expansion of enrolment of students in universities and the corollary need for building many campuses in provinces to accommodate the intake, good libraries tend to be mainly located on the main campuses in capital cities.

With the increasing penetration of the internet connection in cities and towns in Africa and the relative affordability of Information and communication technologies devices such as computers and most importantly smart mobile phones, the future is looking brighter for the
capacity of libraries to provide a more democratic access to resources and open educational resources (OERs) by all learners. This optimism is echoed by Echezona and Ugwuanyi (2012) when they state that “the ICT has transformed the Library into a new information unit by facilitating electronic operations of various library functions such as cataloguing, electronic acquisition and serial control, electronic inter-library loan and electronic circulation functions”.

Policy Recommendation: investing in library services both on campus and off campus in order to promote access to OERs via mobile phones and other ICT devices such computers by ODL learners.

In a study entitled The Role of Public Libraries and Mobile Phones in Accessing OERs (Open Educational Resources) to Distance Learners at Makerere University contributed by Nabushawo, Siminyu and Birevu (2016) to the 2016 2nd International Conference of the AVU, the authors underscore the plight of ODeL learners who do not benefit from educational resources equivalent to those provided to students in conventional systems. Citing other pieces of research on the issue, they indicate that dual-mode universities such as Makerere University fail to provide off-campus library services like region-wide borrowers’ cards and consortia membership between academic libraries. As a result, ODeL students at Makerere complained about the inadequacy of library services in provinces as the textbooks needed for their courses could only be found in the main library at the main campus. On their own device, they sought support from public libraries which are found in most of the towns in Uganda. Thanks to financial and technical support provided by the British Council, public libraries in Uganda have been fitted with internet connection and also given subscriptions to many informational databases thereby making it possible for Makerere University ODeL learners to access OERs to enrich their learning and research capabilities.

In light of this experience, Nabushawo, Siminyu and Birevu (2016) specifically investigated the role of public libraries and mobile phones in accessing OERs. They justified their research on the fact that non-traditional study, meaning distance and open learning and eLearning, is rapidly becoming a growing trend in higher education and therefore educational resources at locations other than the main campuses should be given greater recognition. ODeL students, they say, should be entitled to educational resources equivalent to those provided to students in conventional systems.

The design of their investigation consisted of collecting data in the four regions of Uganda (Central, East, North and West). They then purposively selected four public libraries - one from each region to match those areas with the greatest concentration of ODeL students. They established the availability and the use of mobile phones among ODeL learners (a sample of 300 out of 3,500) for accessing OERs for learning. They also included seven librarians, five lecturers, and six members of staff from the ODL Department of Makerere University.
The following three research questions guided their investigation: (i) What ICT services and resources are available in public libraries to facilitate access to OERs? (ii) How have mobile phones assisted ODL students in accessing OERs for teaching and learning? (iii) What challenges do ODL students face in accessing OERs through public libraries and mobile phones?

In terms of findings, they indicated that regarding the availability of ICT facilities a large percentage of students surveyed said there are no ICT facilities (88%) in the public libraries and there is no internet connection (66%). For the few libraries that have the ICT equipment and Internet connectivity (12%), there are technical staff who can help students to search and access the OERS (62%). However, the internet access by ODL students is neither free nor consistent.

With regard to using mobile phones for accessing OERs, they found the following: 97% of the surveyed students own mobile phones with 45% in possession of smart phones while 55% have ordinary ones. The study further revealed that 72% of the students had their phones connected to the internet as well access to OERs wherever they may be.

Concerning the challenges encountered by ODeL students in accessing OERS, the study revealed that: (i) the Makerere University did enter into effective formal partnership (through MoUs) with public libraries to support ODeL students over a period of ten years but when MoUs expired they were not renewed and working relationships were weakened; (ii) internet connection, power supply (electricity) and maintenance of IT equipment were the main obstacles to accessing OERs; (iii) some mobile phones were not adequate for accessing and storing OERs and mastery of computer skills by students, librarians and other actors was problematic.

**Recommendations**

Recommendations target both governments and universities.

- Governments should be encouraged to build, provide resources and equip public libraries with ICT and internet connectivity. This can be achieved through the use of a percentage of the tax money levied at local levels. Public libraries should also be at the core of the national literacy campaigns and support both the formal, informal education. A supportive policy framework for the development of the book and Information and Telecommunication sectors should be formulated to bring the private sector to enter into partnerships with public libraries, schools and universities.
• African Universities providing ODeL programs should learn from the experience of Makerere University of promoting partnerships between university and public libraries to make OERs easily accessible by learners.

• As recommended by the authors, universities should also increase the allocation of funds towards ODeL activities as well as continue lobbying the development partners to support the revamping of library services for ODeL students.

References


Nabushawo, Siminyu and Birevu.2016. *The Role of Public Libraries and Mobile Phones in Accessing OERs to Distance Learners at Makerere University.* Unpublished paper contributed to the 2016 AVU International Conference.


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