Information Needs and Seeking Behaviour of Distance Learning Students of University of Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract

Information need is a universally widespread essential feature of production, consumption and exchange of human mental creativity across the globe. The objective of the study was to assess the information needs, seeking behavior and sources used by the Distance Leaning Students of University of Lagos. The survey research design method was adopted for the study with a structured questionnaire. Stratified random sampling was used to select respondents from the study population of 10,457 in three departments to give a sample size of 3%. The data analysis employed was the descriptive statistical measure such as percentages and frequency distribution. The data collected shows that 26.7% of the respondents accessed information on financial matters, 20.7% accessed information on education matters and 16.0% of the respondents accessed information on sports. Also, 54.9% of the respondents had been using the library as source of information for the past five years and 60.0% of the distance learners agreed that newspapers/magazines and TV/Radio were frequently used as source to information.

Keywords: information needs, information seeking, information utilization, information sources, distance learning, distance education

Introduction

Distance learning is a formalized learning received by student on locations outside the university environment (Kibirge 2000). The teacher and students are expected to have minimum contact, as they rely on electronic communication and course materials. It is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology and instructional system design that aim to deliver education to students who are not on site (Hamid 2001). Distance learning usually refers to open learning with geographical separation between the learner and the learning institution.

The students of distance education are classified into certain categories and have certain characteristics in common such as age range, out of the conventional school system, undertaking studies on part-time basis, or those who have never been in the conventional education system before (Ayorinde, 2001). These students could be drop outs, those who have left school at certain levels for various reasons such as lack of finances to continue, inability to cope, necessity to go and work. Also, there are some people who have terminated their studies at a certain stage in life and now want to come back to continue as needs arise as well as those who want to upgrade their knowledge and skills for efficiency through modern approaches to solve problems, some official functions that may demand new skills and knowledge obtainable through enrolment in new programme like distance education (Umar, 2004). The distance education centre usually operates under an existing institution like a university, a polytechnic or college of education. Mabawonku (2004) emphasised that distance learning is particularly beneficial to the students as they could learn from their chosen locations which could be thousands of miles away and it also allows individuals to engage in full-time job at the same time of the study. One of the biggest roles of distance learning to students is that it has made education to be flexible, because there is freedom from restriction and rigidity which usually characterised the conventional system of learning. It

makes education accessible and available anytime, anywhere (Radhi, 2008). This reduces scheduling conflicts and therefore increases options and opportunities to individual learners. Distance learning also, often provides access to courses that may not be available elsewhere in conventional learning environments. It has greatly reduced the need for physical travels to higher education sites (Berge, 2000). It has facilitated the balancing of inequalities between age groups. Distance learning is viable in maintaining intellectual capacity to facilitate growth in all sectors and individuals.

Distance education has widened its scope to include online education, online courses, virtual courses, etc (Abdul, 2003). Learning becomes more self-directed, collaborative, intertwined with personal life and work, and more resourse-based, calls for perpetual access and usage of information and learning resources (Oladokun, 2002). Learning shifts from know what to knowing how, how to learn, how to secure information, use it, and how to relate to a changing society (Thomas, 2005). Information is a significant role in a learning environment, paving the way for the new environment, new learning strategies and the emerging new learners, new teachers and new lecturers (Hamid, 2001).

Distance learning students' characteristics are different from students in traditional universities. They are generally adult learners, mature, employed and have family responsibilities (Ayorinde, 2001). They have higher motivation and are willing to take responsibility for their own education (Umar, 2004). Their goals are often more clear cut. Distance students are self-directed, study on independent basis. They learn in a variety of ways and take control over their learning.

The objective of distance learning education programme exists within a national context and it is often perceived as a national needs that determine the establishment of distance education

centres, rather than student demand. According to Ayorinde, (2001) "It aims at making course materials accessible to large audience because the courses are delivered primarily via face-to-face and internet". Courses are specifically adapted to allow student-teacher interaction, student-tests, course monitoring and online registration and evaluation system (Umar, 2004).

Needs is a basic concept in information studies, but one which is difficult to define satisfactorily. Uhegbu (2007), explained that individual have primary needs such as food, shelter, security etc. Information needs is the information that every rational being requires for his day to day existence and well being but does not have. Lin (2000), described information needs as necessity of what an individual ought to have for his work, research or education. It is a piece of information recorded or not recorded, which an individual or member of a group requires for effective functioning in their daily activities.

Information refers to facts and opinion provided and received during the course of daily life: one obtains information directly from other living being, mass-media, electronic data banks, all sorts of observable phenomena in the surrounding environment. (Okpala, 2007). In other words, information organised according to some logical relationships is referred to as a body of knowledge, to be acquired by systematic exposure or study (Oladokun, 2002). Information is an essential phenomenon that enhances understanding of a subject matter or that helps to a certain extent to resolve uncertainty about a subject matter. In an institution of higher learning, information becomes more of a one stop client-oriented that personalizes the student's information to the specific needs (Young, 2002).

Information is an essential resource for individual survival, there is need for individuals to obtain timely and relevant information. Aina (2004) emphasized that information need could be for

recreation, leisure or meeting tasks that are considered critical for survival, or information that could meet day-to-day activities, or even information that is necessary for the common good of the neighborhood, community and the nation in general. Information need could be on various matters or things such as on poverty index statistics, rate in job unemployment, records of inventory in a library etc. There are many categories of distance learners as well as their qualifications and responsibilities e.g. language, location, educational background, age, sex are varied. Some distance learners are teachers, company executives, administrators, scientists, librarians etc. The information sought by individual varied according to their needs (Dada, 2001). To allow appropriate information to be used by the right distance learners, various sources of information must be consulted for such information needs with the aid of library. Utilisation of information differs from individual due to their information needs and other socio economic imperatives. It can be viewed within the context of need, accessibility and function (Farombi, 2001). Uhegbu (2007) posits that utilization of information by any clientele is influenced by the kind of job one is doing. Neclameghan (2001) identified accessibility as one of the prerequisites of information utilization. Since there is growing concern in the need for equal access of information to distance learners, information generation, collection, organization and utilization operate imperfectly (Abass, 2000).

There is lot of information and information needs of distance learning students. Distance learning centres exist in many institutions like university, polytechnics, college of education. In each of these centres, the distance learners need information on course offered by the institution, what is available in the institutions or what can be meaningfully taught through the distance education approach. (Dada, 2001) Distance learners need information on their curriculum and strategies or approaches that would allow different ways of learning, variable learning activities at their own

rates. Information need is therefore, found to be a way distance learner conducts himself or herself when searching for receiving or acquiring information at any given point in time.

Fasasi, (2004) highlighted the problems of distance learning education in Nigeria to include; poor facilities, lack of personnel or human resources, lack of power supply which hinders the use of knowledge transmission requirement, curriculum, which is not focused on national needs, teachers poor attitudes such as forceful sales of handouts, sexual harassment, poor class attendance and poor handling of students assignments. This attitude could be counter-productive as students might lose interest in the programme, poor administration, monitoring of programme, motivation of teachers and supply of course materials on the part of the administrators could lead to failure of the programme. Also teachers and programme coordinators are not sincere with the evaluation of student's performance.

Objectives of the study

The general objective of this study is to examine the information needs of distance learning students in University of Lagos. The specific objectives are to:

1   Identify the information needs of distance learning students in University of Lagos.

2   Find out the purpose of searching for information by distance learning students.

3   Determine the extent to which distance learning students make use of the library in meeting their information needs.

4   investigate the information sources used by distance learning students to satisfy their information needs,

5   identify the problems encountered by distance learning students in their information search.

Research method

The survey research design was adopted for this study. The population for this study comprises of 10,457 distance learning students of University of Lagos. There are three departments that are involved in the distance learning programme in University of Lagos: Accounting, Business Administration, and Education Science. A stratified random sampling technique was adopted based on departments and level of study and a sampling fraction of 3% were employed to give a sample size of 314. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistical method.

Findings and Discussion

A total number of 314 copies of the questionnaire were administered to respondents in the three departments of the institution and 300 copies were retrieved with the assistance of their lecturers giving a response rate of 95.5%

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Departments			Total	
	Business Administration	Accounting	Education Science		
	No. %	No. %	No. %	**No. %**	

Level	34	11.3	26	8.7	2	0.7	62
100	47	15.7	34	11.3	2	0.7	20.7
	23	7.7	17	5.7	0	-	82
200	33	11	21	7	0	-	26.7
	48	16	12	4	1	0.3	40
300							13.4
							54
400							18.0
							61
500							20.3
Gender	88	29.3	51	17	3	1	142
Male	97	32.3	59		2		47.4
			19.7		0.7		158
Female							52.7
Age (years)	22	7.3	16	5.3	0	-	38
20 – 25	24	8	15	5	1		12.6
	66	22	34	11.3	0.3		40
26 – 30	29	9.7	16	5.3	2		13.3
	34	11.3	25	8.3	0.7		102
31 – 35	7	2.3	3	1	1		34.0
	3	1	1	0.3	0.3		46
36 – 40					1		15.3

					0.3		60
41 – 45					0	-	19.9
					0	-	10
46 – 50							3.3
							4
50 and above							1.3
Highest Educational	69	23	46	15.3	2		117
SSCE	63	21	34	11.3	0.7		39.0
Qualification	26	8.7	18	6	1		98
OND	27	9	12	4	0.3		32.6
					1		45
HND					0.3		15.0
					1		40
Others					0.3		13.3
Marital Status	45	15	37		1		83
Single	133	44.3	12.3		0.3		27.6
	7	2.3	70		3	1	206
Married			23.3		1		68.6
			3	1	0.3		11
Divorced							3.6
Religion	90	30	69	23	2		161
Christianity	73	24.3	28		0.7		53.7
	19	6.3	9.3		1		102

Islam	3	1	11	0.3		34.9
African			3.7	1		31
Traditional Religion			2	0.3		10.3
			0.7	1		6
Others				0.3		2.0
Work Experience (years)	29	9.7	23	7.7	1	53
< 5years	59	19.7	34	11.3	0.3	17.7
	71	23.6	38	12.7	1	94
5 – 9years	13	4.3	9	3	0.3	31.3
10 -	9	3	5	1.7	2	111
14years	4	1.3	1	0.3	0.7	37.0
15-					1	23
19years					0.3	7.6
20					0 -	14
–24years					0 -	4.7
>24years						5
						1.6

Table 1, revealed that there were more 200 level students (26.7%) involved in the study it was also revealed that there were more female (52.7%) than male (47.4%) counterparts in the study. There were relatively matured people between the ages of 36-40 years (19.9) who were involved in the search for information needs among the Distance Learning Students of University of Lagos. Also there was high rate of Senior Secondary Certificate Examination holder's (39.0%)

among the respondents. The results revealed that 53.7% of the respondents were Christians, while 10.3% practiced African Traditional Religion and only 2.0% practiced other religion. The respondents had various years of work experience, ranging from less than 5 years of experience to above 24years; the result shows that 31.3% of the participants had 5-9 years of work experience, which was distantly followed by 1.6% of the respondents that had above 24 years of working experience.

Table 2: Information needs of Distance Learning Students

Information needs	No.	%
Professional	13	4.3
Health	7	2.3
Education	62	20.7
Social amenities	8	2.7
Financial matter	80	26.7
Politics	20	6.7
Employment/job opportunities	9	3.0
Religious matter	12	4.0
Domestic matters/family	7	2.3
Government politics and programmes	20	6.7
Entertainment	9	3.0
Religion	5	1.6
Sports	48	16.0

Table 2 showed that information needs of the Distance Learning Students vary among individuals. Financial, education and sport information needs were ranked highest with 26.7%, 20.7% and 16.0% respectively, while information on religious matters, health issues, social amenities and domestic/family matters were the least required information needs of the distance learning students.

Table 3: Purpose of information search

	Professional advice No %	Health related issue No %	Education matters No %	Social welfare matters No %	Financial matters No %	Political issues No %	Employment/job opportunities No %	Religious matters No %
Daily	62 20.7	36 12.0	140 46.7	60 20.0	53 17.7	138 46.0	104 34.7	111 37.0
Weekly	121 40.3	87 29.0	60 20.0	130 43.3	87 29.0	61 20.3	118 39.3	93 31.0
Monthly	33 11.0	102 34.0	55 18.3	59 19.7	32 10.7	21 7.0	39 13.0	53 17.7
Annually	78 26.0	60 20.0	42 14.0	43 14.3	88 29.3	72 24.0	22 7.3	39 13.0
Never	6 2.0	15 5.0	3 1.0	11 3.7	40 13.3	8 2.7	17 5.7	4 1.3

Table 3 revealed the information needs of the distance learning student based on daily, weekly, monthly, and annual requirement. It further revealed that 46.7% of the respondents searched for educational matters on a daily basis and 12.0% of the respondents searched for health related issues daily, while 43.3% searched for information on social welfare matters on a weekly basis and 20.0% the respondents also searched for educational matters. 34.0% of the respondents searched for the information on health related issues monthly while 7.0% searched for information on political issues on a monthly basis. 29.3% searched for information on financial matters annually while 7.3% of the students searched for information on employment/job opportunities, and 13.3% of the respondents never searched for information on financial matters while 1.0% of the student never searched for information on educational matters.

Table 4: Information sources of Distance Learning Students

Information Sources	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Colleagues	93	31.0	132	44.0	51	17.0	24	8.0
Friends/neighbor	72	24.0	60	20.0	93	31.0	75	25.0
Lecturers	92	30.7	117	39.0	61	20.3	30	10.0
Supervisors/boss	86	28.7	153	51.0	40	13.3	21	7.0
Family	146	48.7	136	45.3	13	4.3	5	1.7
Newspapers/magazines	98	32.7	180	60.0	19	6.3	3	1.0
CD-ROM	61	20.3	103	34.3	85	28.4	51	17.0
Databases	61	20.3	42	14.0	151	50.3	46	15.4

TV/Radio	111	37.0	82	27.3	45	15.0	62	20.7
Library, the Internet	162	54.0	70	23.3	36	12.0	32	10.7
Others	61	20.3	70	23.3	78	26.0	91	30.4

The relevant information sources to the respondents were friends/neighbours, lecturers, newspapers/magazines, CD-ROM, databases, TV/Radio, and library and Internet were the relevant source of information. The scale for measuring the use of information sources by distance learning students are strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree and disagree. For the purpose of reporting these studies strongly agree were merged to be agreed and strongly disagree and disagree were merged to be disagreed. Table 9 revealed that 60.0% of the respondents agreed with newspapers/magazines as a source of information compared with 1.0% of the students who disagreed to newspapers/magazines as a source of information. The table also revealed that 50.3% of the respondents disagreed to database as one of the sources to their information needs compared with 14.0% who agreed to database as one of the sources to their information needs..

Table 5: Relevance of information sources by distance learning students

Frequency	Very relevant		Relevant		Not relevant	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Colleagues	82	27.3	140	46.7	78	26.0
Friends/neighbor	152	50.7	111	37.0	37	12.3
Lecturers	172	57.3	67	22.4	61	20.3
Supervisors/boss	93	31.0	136	45.3	71	23.7
Family	81	27.0	216	72.0	3	1.0
Newspapers/magazines	201	67.0	68	23.0	31	10.0
CD-ROM	162	54.0	72	24.0	66	22.0
Databases	182	60.7	117	39.0	1	0.3
TV/Radio	184	61.3	100	33.3	16	5.4
Library, the Internet	162	54.0	78	26.0	60	20.0
Others	72	24.0	140	46.7	88	29.3

The table above revealed that 72.0% believed that Family as a source of information were relevant to their information needs while 61.3% of the students also believed that TV/Radio source of information were very relevant and 29.3% believed that other information sources were not relevant to their information needs

Table 6: Frequency of use of the information sources by distance learning students

Frequency	Daily		Weekly		Monthly		Never	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Colleagues	151	50.3	60	20.0	47	15.7	42	14.0
Friends/Neighbour	172	57.3	67	22.3	51	17.0	10	3.4
Lecturers	112	37.3	72	24.0	114	38.0	2	0.7
Supervisors/boss	124	41.3	54	18.0	72	24.0	50	16.7
Family	192	64.0	90	30.0	15	5.0	3	1.0
Newspapers/magazines	201	67.0	56	18.7	14	4.7	29	9.6
CD-ROM	62	20.7	148	49.3	70	23.3	20	6.7
Databases	58	19.3	50	16.7	142	47.3	50	16.7
Librarian/Information	131	43.7	68	22.7	78	26.0	23	7.6
The Internet	184	61.4	49	16.3	51	17.0	16	5.3
Radio/TV	201	67.0	82	27.3	15	5.0	2	0.7
Documentary sources (eg. Conference proceedings)	92	30.7	146	48.7	11	3.6	51	17.0
Others	110	36.7	115	38.3	4	1.3	71	23.7

The table revealed that newspapers/magazines, TV/Radio were the most frequently consulted information sources compared to CD-ROM, lecturers and the Internet which were often consulted by the distance learning students.

Table 13: Challenges encountered by distance learning students

challenges	Strongly Agree No %		Agree No %		Disagree No %		Strongly Disagree No %	
Information sources are not readily available	95	31.7	128	42.7	61	20.3	16	5.3
Information sources are not easily accessible	112	37.3	104	34.7	72	24.0	12	4.0
Library staffs are not accommodating	82	27.3	135	45.0	44	14.7	39	13.0
Information is sometimes not timely	67	22.3	117	39.0	89	29.7	27	9.0
Difficulty in using the library catalogue	101	33.7	121	40.3	47	15.7	31	10.3
Inadequate search skills	96	32.0	143	47.7	50	16.7	11	3.3
Mutilation and stealing of library materials has deprived my access to information needs	85	28.3	129	43.0	66	22.0	20	6.7
Information is not relevant to my needs	72	24.0	92	30.7	88	9.3	48	16.0
Problem of wrong shelving of library materials on the shelves	99	33.0	130	43.3	43	14.3	28	9.3
I have problem of searching for and retrieving information materials online in the library	132	44.0	97	32.3	57	19.0	14	4.7

| Library is far | 101 | 33.7 | 86 | 28.7 | 72 | 24.0 | 41 | 13.7 |
| High cost of use of the Internet | 89 | 29.7 | 127 | 42.3 | 59 | 19.7 | 25 | 8.3 |

The challenges encountered by distance learning students in the quest of seeking information ranged from; information sources are not readily available, information sources are not easily accessible, library staffs are not accommodating, information is sometimes not timely, difficulty in using the library catalogue, inadequate search skills, mutilation and stealing of library materials has deprived my access to information needs, information is not relevant to my needs, problem of wrong shelving of library materials on the shelves, problem of searching for and retrieving information materials online in the library, library is far, high cost of use of the Internet. The scale for measuring the challenges encountered by distance learning students are strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree and disagree. For the purpose of reporting these studies strongly agree were merged to be agreed and strongly disagree and disagree were merged to be disagreed. The table also revealed that 47.7% of the students agreed with the problem of inadequate search skills compared with 3.3% of the students disagreed to the problem of inadequate search skills while 45.0% of the students agreed with library staff were not accommodating compared with 13.0% the students who disagreed with the problem.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Information needs is a vital element that had help distance learning students of University of Lagos in decision making and the study had tried to identify the rate at which the students searched or need information especially on financial, education, and sport respectively. The urgent and timely need of this information by distance learning students would definitely help to improve their information needs search.

The following are recommended for policy objectives of identifying information needs of distance learning students. There is need for the institutions to train the students on information literacy skills so as to enable them identify their information needs and appropriate sources to be used in meeting these needs. Managements of the institution should provide means of encouraging the distance learners to make use of electronic sources that can enable them to have access to current information needs. The institution should create an avenue for orientation to students of the necessary library and information use skills that can enhance their information search, retrieval and thereby meeting their information needs. The school managements and administrators should ensure better academic environment in which the students will be provided with more access points to information sources and needs. The distance learning students should also be made to undergo a library information use course to bridge the information search, retrieval and evaluation skills which can be employed in meeting their information needs.

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