The Usage of Electronic Resources at Zimbabwe Open University
Midlands Library, Gweru, Zimbabwe

Mthokozisi Masumbika Ncube¹, Willard Tarumbira²
¹Zimbabwe Open University Library, ZIMBABWE

ABSTRACT
The advent of electronic resources in academic circles towards the end of the 20th century presaged a fresh landmark for research and scholarship as the innovation offered academics and scholars in universities with extensive, timely and contemporary sources of information. Therefore, this research grew out of the realization that regardless of numerous exertions that have been made by the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands library to enhance access to these resources, their usage among scholars remained very limited. This pragmatic study, conducted in this library in Gweru, endeavoured to find out why the utilization of electronic resources within the library was limited, and also institute what could be done to correct this problem. The study used questionnaires, interviews, and observations to gather information. The study established that the major cause of low usage of electronic resources in the library was due to the inadequate ICT resources within the library, which in turn caused slow Internet connectivity. The study also established that some of the students were not aware of the electronic resources offered by the library. Therefore, the study recommends that the library acquires adequate ICT resources that facilitate electronic resources access; this would also include increasing the bandwidth of the network to expedite the Internet connectivity. The study also recommends that the library undertakes diverse strategies to market the electronic resources that the library offers. In essence, the library should take a pro-active approach in ensuring that electronic resources are utilized by students in order for them to produce up to standard academic work, and also such that they can enrich themselves through these resources.

Keywords--- Electronic resources, electronic resources usage, library resources and services, Zimbabwe Open University Midlands library.

I. INTRODUCTION

Information Communication Technology tools, like electronic resources, have become an indispensable part of academic libraries in the contemporary 21st century. According to Gakibayo, Ikoja-Odongo and Okello-Obura (2013), by the turn of the 21st century, library computerization and the Internet had transfigured information access and library operations around the world. In essence, electronic resources are information resources provided in electronic format, and these include resources accessible on the Internet, such as e-books, e-journals, online database, CD-ROM databases or other computer–based electronic networks (Tsakonas et al., 2006; Gakibayo, Ikoja-Odongo and Okello-Obura, 2013). Commenting on these, Ollé and Borrego (2010) note that during the last two decades, the quantity of electronic information accessible in academic libraries and the miscellany of tools to locate and access information have increased enormously. These resources are not limited to conventional academic institutions, but are also a hub in distance learning academic institution. In principle, a major advantage of electronic resources, particularly to distance learners and those with limited time to access the library, is their availability from a peripheral location to the library through remote access (Damilola, 2010). In other terms, electronic resources expedite distance learners to access germane information on research topics, latest discoveries and information on all disciplines/subjects within and without their respective academic libraries; in addition, electronic resources afford flexibility, comprehensiveness, efficiency and effectiveness in information service delivery to the distance learners (Damilola, 2010).

A study by Ollé and Borrego (2010) found out that library users had a high acceptance of electronic resources, such that they were unwillingness to return to print-only versions. In their discussions, citing Tenopir (2003), they designate that there was a prompt adoption of electronic resources in academic spheres. Diverse studies have been undertaken on the utilization of electronic resources in academic libraries.
resources in colleges and universities, with most of these studies revealing that there was a high usage of these resources (De Vicente and Crawford, 2004; Gakibayo, Ikoja-Odongo and Okello-Obura, 2013). Conversely, in other academic libraries, even though these libraries have these tools and resources in place, their usage leaves a lot to be desired. Agaba, Kigongo-Bukena and Nyumba (2005) conducting a research on electronic resources usage at Makerere University, found out that there was low usage of these resources. In essence, although electronic resources have a number of functional benefits which can be of immense use to students in colleges and research institutions, however, most students were not effectively utilizing these resources in some academic libraries, to a degree that some of the accessible electronic resources had never been utilized at all (Adesiya and Agyem, 2006; Gakibayo, Ikoja-Odongo and Okello-Obura, 2013). In such a view, there are diverse factors and issues that hinder students within universities from using electronic resources at their disposal. According to Damilola (2010) insufficient skills is one of the reasons for underutilization of electronic resources. In principle, students must acquire and practice ICT skills necessary to exploit electronic resources (Okello-Obura and Magara, 2008). According to Tripathi and Jeevan (2008), distance learners are detached along the length and breadth of the country, such that they find it difficult to adhere to the main campus library in order to utilize the physical and electronic resources of the library. This, consequently, denotes that in an open distance learning environment, remote access to library electronic resources is critical, hence facilities that expedite remote access play a central role in the utilization of electronic resources. A study carried out by Ollé and Borrego (2010) on the use of electronic resources at Catalan academic libraries in Spain found out that librarians (participants of the study) noted that the prodigious majority of communications received in library mailboxes corresponded to problems in access to electronic resources, these were mostly platform breakdowns, difficulties in accessing resources off-campus, or discontinued resources.

Remarking on factors that affect utilization of electronic resources, Tripathi and Jeevan (2008) cite that user awareness; problems in electronic interlibrary loan and document delivery services; acquisition and collection development issues also expedite underutilization of electronic resources. They also went on to denote that lack of distance learning friendly licensing models, budgetary and staffing restraints also affects the usage of electronic resources in some libraries that support distance learners. Subsequently, diverse researchers found out that some libraries had high usage of electronic resources, while others discovered that there were low usages of electronic resources. Therefore, as the usage of electronic resources at Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Regional Library is very low, this motivated the researchers to ascertain the reasons why the effective utilization of these resources still remained a mirage to the library, and establish mechanism that could be implemented to enhance and realize effective utilization of these resources. In such a view, the following questions guided this research: What is the importance of electronic resources that Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Regional Library offers to its user community? Why are students not effectively utilizing electronic resources at Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Regional Library? Which mechanisms can Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Regional Library implement to enhance and realize effective utilization of electronic resources?

I. II. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), which is an institution of higher and tertiary education. This university is a distance teaching and learning institution, with ten regional centers positioned in each and every province in Zimbabwe. In that esteem, the regional centers had libraries, established to support the educational and research faculties of students, staff members and other stakeholders. Respectively, this study focused on the ZOU Midlands Regional library, located in Gweru within the Midlands province in Zimbabwe. The focus of the study was on the use of electronic resources at the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Regional library, which still remained a mirage. The study used a pragmatic approach, which encompassed mixing elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches within this single study. On that respect, the qualitative elements conformed to the use of interviews and direct observations, whilst embedded closed ended questions within the questionnaires corresponded to the quantitative approach.

The researchers conducted interviews with staff members within the regional center. This was done to gain insight from the experiences, opinions, and view-points of the staff members about the intervening factors that conformed to the use of electronic resources by the staff and students within the region. In addition, this enabled researchers to discover what individuals thought and how they felt about electronic resources within the library. Conversely, as interviews are usually time-consuming, in terms of setting up, interviewing, transcribing, and analyzing. In that regard, the researchers used time management skills, which entailed setting goals for the interviews and careful planning of the interview structure, style, the setting, and recording the data. The observations enabled the researchers to engage with the library users while corresponding to the electronic resources in the library. This enabled the researchers to collect data as the situations and events occurred (user using electronic resources), hence not relying on the participants’ or people’s willingness or ability to provide information.
However, this method was susceptible to the observer bias (Hawthorne Effect), entailing library users changing their behavior as they became cognizant that they were being observed. To curtail this observer bias, the researchers used a double blind strategy, where subjects were not informed about what was being studied. As noted above, the researchers used semi-structured questionnaires (incorporating open and closed ended questions) to collect data from a large population of students to acquire a general insight on electronic resources from the students’ point of views. In essence, this enabled the researchers to collect large amounts of information from the student population in a short period of time, and in a relatively cost effective manner. As questionnaires are prone to researcher imposition, connoting that when developing the questionnaire, a researcher would be making their own decisions and assumptions as to what is and is not important. However, the researchers were guided by research questions in developing the questionnaires, guarding against imposition on the respondents.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research was divided into parts according to the research questions. The first division observed the importance of electronic resources. The second section established the reasons behind the low utilizing electronic resources within the regional library; and the third division focused on mechanisms that the library could implement to enhance and realize effective utilization of electronic resources.

IMPORTANCE OF ELECTRONIC RESOURCE

Through the interviews with the staff members within the university, the researchers found out that electronic resources are imperative to an open distance learning institution as they provide up-to-date, relevant information. In essence, from the research findings, the researchers established that electronic resources were especially useful for finding information which was not yet available in books, and also helpful in obtaining up-to-date information on contemporary events or issues. In other terms, electronic resources are especially helpful to distant learners to obtain accurate and timely literature to individuals who have limited time to physically access their respective libraries (Sharma, 2009).

The other importance of electronic resources, as emanating from the research findings, was that they provided access to information that might have been restricted to the users due to geographical location or finances. In other terms, convenient access from a remote location to the library is vital advantage of electronic resources (Damilola, 2010). The researchers also found that this was a predominantly relative point as it characterized an open distance learning milieu, whereby students are geographically dispersed from the university.

The researchers also found out that electronic resources provided access to a wider range of information, according to the questionnaire results, this ensured an enhancement in academic performance due to the eminence of information. The researchers also discovered this point through conversing with the academic staff members, who signified that the majority of students who used these facilities at regular intervals performed immensely better that those who did not correspond to these facilities. In other words, the extensive information coverage of electronic resources is able to facilitate academic excellence in students’ achievements (Sharma, 2009). Through the interviews, the study also found out that the other importance of electronic resources was that they were able to provide broad links to supplementary resources that could be allied to a topic being researched on. In other terms, electronic resources were found to be pertinent in providing extensive links to additional resources related to contents; with varied search facilities also coming into play as essential services brought about by electronic resources.

Due to the importance of electronic resources, libraries have seen a prodigious transfiguration in the contemporary years as print medium is progressively giving way to the electronic form of materials (Sharma, 2009). However, through statistical analysis on the usage patterns and trends, the researchers noticed that at Zimbabwe Open University Midlands regional library, this view point is still an illusion (mirage), as there is a very low usage of these resources. In such a view, it was essential for researchers to unveil the reasons behind this predicament.

REASONS FOR LOW ELECTRONIC RESOURCES USAGE

From the questionnaires administered, the study discovered that 75% of the total respondents were aware of the existence of electronic resources in the library. However, even with this relatively high level of awareness of electronic resources, a substantially high amount of the total respondents (47%) have never used the resources. While 26% of the total respondents noted that they have used the electronic resources once, with 25% indicating that they have used such resources twice, whilst the remaining 2% of the total respondents acknowledged that they frequently use the e-resources. This therefore entails that 98% of the total respondents did not fully utilize the electronic resources. In such a view, though the majority of respondents were aware of the existence of electronic resources, the effective and full utilization of the resources was quite low. In this regard, there are a number of reasons that the respondents indicated as contributing to the low usage patterns of the e-resources.

The first factor that the respondents indicated was that they did not have adequate time to fully access and utilize the resources within the library. This coincides to what Gakibayo, Ikoja-Odongo and Okello-Obura (2013)
that they favored the use of external Internet facilities that had better Internet infrastructure than the library. Most of the respondents that alluded to this view point also mentioned that they preferred search engines, like Google, other than electronic resources that the library provided access to. In their insight, this was mostly because such search engines were easy to use, providing also user friendly interfaces. From the interview findings, some of the participants indicated that due to the inadequate institutional ICT infrastructure, individuals preferred other service providers which had effective and efficient ICT infrastructure. Therefore, ICT infrastructure and search facilities had a bearing on the utilization of electronic resources (Damilola, 2010).

From the interview findings, the study found out that lack of adequate ICT skills was a major obstacle to electronic resource usage by students. This was also noted by questionnaire respondents who indicated was lack of Information Communication Technology (ICT) skills. In essence, a number of respondents established that they lacked sufficient skills and competencies to fully utilize the available electronic resources which the library provided. As such, library patrons cannot access and utilize electronic resources without seemingly information and computer skills (Okello-Obura and Magara, 2008). In addition to the skills, some of the respondents were cynical about the authenticity and credibility of electronic resources as equated with books (manual resources). In other terms some of the respondents were skeptical about the authenticity and reliability of information emanating from Web sources.

Some of the respondents noted that they were unable to remotely use electronic resources that the library provided access to as they resided in rural areas where there was neither electricity nor Internet connectivity. In this esteem, such respondents detected that they were not been exposed to ICT tools and applications, thus making it difficult for them to access and utilize electronic resources. In that thrust, interview findings also revealed this aspect, as some of the participants noted that some of the university students resided in the rural environment, where there was neither electricity nor effective Internet connectivity, with poor learning facilities; whereby libraries were not that much an integral part of learning. In their view, some of the students were not exposed to ICT and information sources, therefore, providing justification why some students did not use the electronic resources in the library.

From the interview findings, the age of individuals also played a fundamental role in electronic resources usage, in their view the younger the students were, the greater they used electronic resources. From the questionnaire results, most of the respondents were adults, between the age of 30 and 65 years, the researchers also observed that a great majority of students within the university fell within that range. A study by Ncube (2014) on this library also revealed that the majority of students were adults. In such a view, the low usage of electronic resources could also be attributed to the fact that most of the students in the university were old. In essence, there was a symbiotic relationship between age and electronic resources usage, entailing that older individuals used electronic resources lesser than their younger counterparts (Thanuskodi, 2010).

The other reason for the low usage of electronic resources as noted by some of the questionnaire respondents corresponded to the user credentials to access the resources. The respondents noted that they did not have the university’s list of user credentials (username and passwords) to most of the electronic resources that the library subscribed to. The researchers also observed that students had to visit the library to acquire such credentials, of which a majority of students did not do so. In other terms, access to electronic resources through login and password presented a number of challenges, such that individuals shied away from the use of the resources due to this quandary. In this regard, there are various mechanisms that respondents and participants felt the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands regional library could implement to increase electronic resources usage and become effective in the provision of information within this contemporary global information era.

**WAYS OF INCREASING ELECTRONIC RESOURCES USAGE**

Some of the questionnaire respondents noted that there was need for the library to effectively market its resources and service (inclusive of electronic resources) for maximum utilization. In accord, most of the interview participants also aired the same sentiment, as they felt that the library was not doing enough to market its resources and services. As an example, some of the interview participants indicated that posters, brochures, or leaflets that corresponded to the marketing of electronic resources would go a long way in marketing this particular resource.

Besides marketing, the study found out that there was need for the library to undertake diverse training initiatives; this included orientation, workshops, seminars, and computer training sessions to ensure that students have the pre-requisite skills to conform to the electronic resources. In other terms, education and training to the students on specific issues, such as using the library’s online catalogue from remote location, database searching, utilizing electronic resources, and creating awareness about library practices and policies would also enhance the usage of electronic resources (Tripathi and Jeevan, 2008). In essence, for effective use of electronic resources, computer utilization skills are essential (Kinengyere, 2007; Okello-Obura and Magara, 2008). In addition to user...
education, the study also found out that there was need for the university to enhance the basic infrastructure relevant for electronic resources usage. In other terms, this entails that infrastructure at the regional centers libraries should be upgraded to conform to the needs of the present-day students, learners, and educationists.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A library within an open distance learning university plays a critical role in providing informational resources for students scattered across the divide. Therefore, such libraries are expected to provide electronic resources that students can access at remote locations. Though the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands library provided such facilities, their uptake and utilization was generally very low due to a varied of reasons, with access to these resources within and outside the library being the major causal factor. In such a view, investment into ICT infrastructure to improve access to electronic resources is a major factor.

As some of the students were not aware of the electronic resources that the library provided access to, there is, therefore, a need for the library to undertake different strategies of promoting library resources (including electronic resources). This could include the use of electronic mailings, text messages, brochures, leaflets, and notices on notice boards to promote the available electronic resources (Gakibayo, Ikoja-Odongo and Okello-Obura, 2013). In addition, students could also be encouraged to use these resources by their tutors and lecturers in their curricular, academic work and for other informational endeavors.

There is also need for the library to undertake extensive and effective training sessions to educate students on the utilization of electronic resources. This would include the library undertaking information and computer literacy skill training programmes; in such a view, these programmes may be made compulsory for each first year students. As these training sessions would also incorporate strategies on how to access electronic resources using mobile telephone and other portable gadgets, hence this would ensure that students residing in rural areas can access to online resources using such gadgets. Henceforth, such an exertion would increase the skills base of students in corresponding to online resources, thereby increasing the usage of electronic resources. In this regard, the library should also afford on-screen help facilities, and printed guides to assist students in their online searches. These would aide and encourage students to utilize electronic resources within the library.

On the part of user credentials to access some of the electronic resources, the library should implement such a system that enables students to gain access to electronic resources using their student numbers as usernames and their barcode numbers as passwords. This would ensure that students do not necessarily visit the library first to attain user credentials to electronic resources. In principle, the library itself should take a pro-active approach in ensuring that each and every resource in its holding is used to its maximum, such a stance would enable the library to gain recognition as a backbone for the university.

REFERENCES