

Innovative Approaches and Programmes Implemented by the National Open University of Nigeria Library to Support Access to Educational Resources for Marginalised Distance Learners

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Abstract

This study evaluated the effectiveness of innovative strategies employed by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Library to support marginalized distance learners in accessing educational resources. Employing a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 335 students across Nigeria using structured questionnaires and analyzed through descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that infrastructural initiatives such as establishing community study centers and expanding ICT infrastructure—like internet hotspots and digital kiosks—were highly effective and well-received, with mean scores of 2.76 and 2.97 respectively. Conversely, strategies related to financial aid and digital literacy training received lower satisfaction and perceived effectiveness, highlighting significant gaps. The results underscored that while physical access and resource availability positively impacted learners, financial constraints and limited digital skills hindered optimal utilization of library services. The study concluded that although NOUN had made commendable progress, enhancing financial support mechanisms and expanding targeted training programs were critical for inclusive access. Recommendations included establishing stronger partnerships with government and non-profit entities to provide subsidies for digital resources, expanding collaborations with public libraries and repositories, and developing comprehensive financial aid initiatives. Addressing these areas would help bridge the access gap, promote digital equity, and foster a more inclusive learning environment for marginalized distance learners, thereby advancing the university's mission of equitable education.

Keywords: Distance, Information, Initiatives, Learners, Library

Introduction

Ensuring that marginalised distance learners have access to relevant and high-quality information resources is vital for fostering equitable learning opportunities. These learners often face barriers such as limited internet connectivity, financial difficulties, and low digital literacy skills, which could impede their ability to access and effectively utilise information (Amuda & Tella, 2019). Research indicates that distance learners frequently encounter challenges like inadequate digital infrastructure, financial constraints, and insufficient library

support (Christian & Andrew, 2021). Librarians provides accessible digital libraries, mobile-compatible learning platforms, and customised user support services can help bridge these gaps and improve learning outcomes (Tait, 2018).

Academic libraries such as NOUN library can address the information needs of disadvantaged distance learners through targeted strategies and initiatives that promote access to information resources. It is essential that learners can fully utilise library resources for academic activities, develop vital research skills, and achieve their educational objectives—contributing to a more inclusive and knowledge-driven society.

Various approaches have been developed to address these needs and promote equitable access to educational resources. Among the most effective is the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs), which provide free, high-quality academic materials and help alleviate financial barriers for students (Hollister, 2020). Enhancing library services to be mobile-friendly allows learners to access resources through smartphones, a vital feature for those lacking personal computers (Amuda & Tella, 2019). Additionally, offline access solutions—such as downloadable content and preload storage devices—play a key role for students in remote or underserved areas, enabling them to access educational materials without relying on consistent internet connectivity.

Virtual reference services—including online chat, email support, and toll-free helplines—further enhance accessibility by providing direct assistance from librarians and academic advisors (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2000). Targeted digital literacy training equips learners with essential skills in research and navigation, helping them make the most of available resources (Chigbundu & Oluwabiya, 2023). Finally, flexible borrowing and delivery options, such as extended loan periods and home delivery services, enable students who cannot visit physical libraries to access print resources when needed (Lim, Foo, Khoo, Chen, Fox, Urs, & Thanos, 2002). Collectively, these strategies help ensure that marginalized learners—such as individuals with physical challenges, blind students, and other disadvantaged groups—receive the necessary support to succeed academically and contribute to creating a more inclusive educational environment. Beyond these efforts, various initiatives by libraries and educational institutions, including the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), aim to further bridge the gap in access to information for marginalized distance learners. One notable example is the establishment of community-based learning hubs, which provide physical spaces equipped with internet access, study areas, and library resources. These hubs are particularly vital for students in underserved regions, ensuring that even those facing mobility challenges, visual impairments, or limited connectivity can access educational materials and participate fully in their learning journeys (Usman, Salisu, & Ibarahim, 2022).

Another approach involves library outreach programmes, where mobile libraries, book donation drives, and literacy workshops are organised to reach students who lack direct access to institutional libraries (Amuda & Tella, 2019). Collaborations between universities, public libraries, and non-governmental organisations also play a crucial role in reducing disparities by sharing resources and expanding access (Chigbundu & Oluwabiya, 2023). To support students with disabilities, customised learning support initiatives provide assistive

technologies such as screen readers and Braille materials, ensuring inclusive access to educational content (Hollister, 2020). Additionally, some institutions offer scholarships and subsidised access to digital resources, helping disadvantaged students obtain vital materials without financial hardship (Tait, 2018). Furthermore, the expansion of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure in underserved regions—such as free Wi-Fi hotspots, digital kiosks, and community computer centers—greatly improves access to online academic resources (Chigbundu & Oluwabiye, 2023). When these initiatives are effectively executed, it will foster an inclusive learning environment that addresses the diverse needs of disadvantaged distance learners. Therefore, investigating the innovative approaches and programs implemented by the National Open University of Nigeria Library to support access to educational resources for marginalized distance learners is both necessary and timely.

Statement of the Problem

Despite various strategies and initiatives aimed at addressing the information needs of disadvantaged distance learners, considerable gaps remain, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria. A key issue is the digital divide, characterised by unequal access to information and communication technologies (ICT). This disparity often stems from infrastructural deficiencies, limited computer literacy, unreliable electricity supply, and poor internet connectivity, especially in rural regions. These challenges impede the effective deployment of e-learning strategies, leaving many students without access to essential educational resources.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these issues, exposing the unpreparedness of educational systems to shift seamlessly to online learning. In Nigeria, for example, the abrupt move to digital learning highlighted significant shortcomings, including inadequate infrastructure and limited technical capacity, particularly in rural communities. Socioeconomic disparities also mean that students from lower-income households are less likely to own digital devices or have reliable internet access, thereby widening the educational divide (Adarkwah, 2021). These persistent gaps emphasize the urgent need for more inclusive and comprehensive strategies to ensure all distance learners can access the information and resources necessary for their learning success.

Purpose of the Study:

The main purpose of the study sought to determine the effectiveness of Innovative Approaches and Programmes Implemented by the National Open University of Nigeria Library to Support Access to Educational Resources for Marginalised Distance Learners specifically the study focused to:

- i. determine the effectiveness of initiatives employed by National Open University library to address information needs of disadvantaged distance learners.
- ii. ascertain the level of satisfaction with library services among disadvantaged distance learners with strategies and initiative employed by National Open University

- iii. Examine how the strategies employed by the National Open University of Nigeria Library address the information needs of disadvantaged distance learners.

Research Questions

1. What is the effectiveness of the initiatives employed by the National Open University library in addressing the information needs of disadvantaged distance learners?
2. What is the level of satisfaction among disadvantaged distance learners with the strategies and initiatives implemented by the National Open University library?
3. How do the strategies employed by the National Open University of Nigeria Library address the information needs of disadvantaged distance learners?

Literature Review

A study by Coetzer and Mapulanga (2021) assessed the satisfaction levels of Advanced Certificate in Teaching students regarding online library services at the University of the Free State in South Africa. The findings indicated that (85%) of respondents had never utilised online library services, with high data costs and login issues identified as significant barriers. The study emphasised the importance for libraries to develop comprehensive distance learning policies and to enhance information literacy to improve service delivery. Similarly, Mubofu and Malekani (2021) examined the accessibility of library resources by distance learners at the Open University of Tanzania. Their research identified challenges such as high data costs, information overload, and insufficient search skills. Recommendations included the appointment of dedicated distance librarians and the provision of detailed online tutorials to enhance resource accessibility.

Ayoung, Bugre, and Baada (2020) evaluated Ghana's Library Connectivity Project, which aimed to extend ICT and library services to rural communities. The initiative benefited students by improving practical ICT skills; however, it faced obstacles such as inadequate logistics and staffing. The study highlighted the importance of sustainable funding and infrastructure development to support such programmes. Shikali and Muneja (2024) conducted a systematic review analysing access to library resources by university students during the COVID-19 pandemic across Africa. The review revealed that, while many academic libraries expanded electronic resources and virtual services, issues such as limited internet access and inadequate digital literacy persisted. These challenges underscored the need for improved ICT infrastructure and targeted training programmes.

At the University of the Free State, South Africa, a further study investigated the perceived satisfaction of Advanced Certificate in Teaching students with online library services. The results showed that 85% of respondents had never used these services, and 35% primarily relied on Google for information. High data costs and login/password issues were identified as major barriers, contributing to computer anxiety and physical discomfort among learners. These challenges negatively affected their satisfaction with the library services provided (Coetzer & Mapulanga, 2021). Similarly, research conducted at Uganda Martyrs

University explored operational challenges faced in delivering library services to distance education students. The study found that 75.8% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with available library services and resources. Issues such as lack of login credentials for e-resources, poor internet connectivity, limited assistance from library staff, insufficient training on accessing online materials, and geographical isolation hindered effective access, thereby reducing satisfaction levels among distance learners (Buruga & Osamai, 2019).

The studies by Coetzer and Mapulanga (2021) and Mubofu and Malekani (2021) demonstrate a direct link between library strategies and the fulfilment of distance learners' information needs. Implementing effective strategies, such as formulating dedicated distance learning policies and improving information literacy, can significantly enhance service delivery and resource accessibility. Furthermore, evaluations of the Ghana Library Connectivity Project and the measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the positive impact of library initiatives in addressing information needs. Nonetheless, challenges such as infrastructural deficiencies and digital literacy gaps continue to affect their overall effectiveness. These findings underscore the necessity for comprehensive planning and sustained support to ensure that such initiatives adequately meet the needs of disadvantaged distance learners (Ayoung, Bugre, & Baada, 2020).

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population comprised all distance learners enrolled at the National Open University of Nigeria, totaling 2,541 students across nineteen states in the Northern region. To determine an appropriate sample size, the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table was utilised, indicating that a sample of approximately 335 respondents was sufficient to achieve a confidence level of (95%) with a margin of error of (5%). A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure that the sample accurately represented the various strata within the population, including gender, age, geographic location, and socio-economic status. Data collection was conducted through a self-developed questionnaire specifically designed for this study. The responses gathered from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, to effectively summarize the data. The analysis was performed using SPSS version 23, employing a four-point Likert scale.

Presentation of Results

The section presents the data analysis of the study as follows:

Research Question 1: How effective are the initiatives employed by National Open University library to address information needs of disadvantaged distance learners?

Table 1: Effective initiatives employed by National Open University library to address information needs of disadvantaged distance learners?

SN	Item	HE	E	IE	HIE	$\bar{X}$	SD
1	Establishment of community study centres with internet access and library resources is	88 (26.3)	115 (34.7)	95 (28.4)	36 (10.6)	2.76	0.96
2	Enhancing access through partnerships with universities, public libraries, and non-profits is	72 (21.5)	116 (34.9)	86 (25.8)	60 (17.8)	2.60	1.02
3	Engaging disadvantaged learners through mobile library services and community partnerships.	80 (24)	124 (37.1)	70 (20.9)	60 (18)	2.67	1.03
4	Adapting resources for students with disabilities through assistive technologies and alternative formats is	63 (18.7)	141 (42.1)	71 (21.2)	60 (18)	2.62	0.99
5	Provides financial assistance for acquiring digital textbooks and subscriptions is	30 (8.9)	47 (14.1)	154 (46)	104 (31)	2.01	0.90
6	Expanding access by setting up internet hotspots, digital kiosks, and public-access computer is	66 (19.6)	172 (51.2)	41 (12.1)	3 (17.1)	2.97	0.77

The Table provides an insightful assessment of the perceived effectiveness of various initiatives employed by the National Open University (NOUN) Library to address the information needs of disadvantaged distance learners. Overall, the data indicates that infrastructural and access-oriented strategies are viewed more favorably by respondents. For instance, the establishment of community study centers equipped with internet access and library resources received a high level of positive ratings, with a majority considering it 'Effective' and a significant proportion rating it as 'Highly Effective.' Similarly, expanding access through internet hotspots, digital kiosks, and public-access computers was rated as the most effective initiative overall, with the highest mean score of 2.97 and a strong consensus among respondents.

Other initiatives such as enhancing access through partnerships with universities, public libraries, and non-profits, as well as engaging learners via mobile library services and community partnerships, also received predominantly positive evaluations. Respondents appreciated these efforts, as reflected in their high mean scores and favorable ratings. Efforts to adapt resources for students with disabilities using assistive technologies also garnered

positive feedback, indicating that these strategies are effectively addressing specific needs within the disadvantaged learner population.

However, the initiative related to providing financial assistance for acquiring digital textbooks and subscriptions was perceived as less effective. A majority of respondents rated this strategy as 'Ineffective,' suggesting that financial aid measures currently do not significantly impact or meet the needs of disadvantaged learners. The lower mean score for this initiative supports this perception, highlighting an area where the university's efforts may need reevaluation or enhancement. Overall, the findings suggest that infrastructural and access-related initiatives are more successful in meeting learners' needs, whereas financial support strategies require further attention to improve their effectiveness.

Research Question 2: What is the level of satisfaction with library services among disadvantaged distance learners with strategies and initiative employed by National Open University

Table 2: Level of satisfaction with strategies and initiative employed

SN	Item	VH	H	L	VL	Mean	SD
1	How satisfied are you with availability of Open Educational Resources	88 (26.3)	115 (34.7)	95 (28.4)	36 (10.6)	2.76	0.96
2	How satisfied are you with mobile-friendly library services	80 (23.8)	116 (34.6)	89 (26.6)	50 (15)	2.67	1.00
3	How satisfied are you with offline/low-bandwidth access	80 (24)	124 (37.1)	70 (20.9)	60 (18)	2.67	1.03
4	How satisfied are you with virtual reference services	65 (19.3)	146 (43.6)	62 (18.5)	62 (18.6)	2.64	0.99
5	How satisfied are you with digital literacy training	30 (8.9)	47 (14.1)	154 (46)	104 (31)	2.01	0.90
6	How satisfied are you with flexible borrowing/delivery of print resources	66 (19.6)	172 (51.2)	41 (12.1)	3 (17.1)	2.97	0.77
7	How satisfied are you with community learning hubs	57 (16.9)	96 (28.5)	109 (32.4)	74 (22.2)	2.40	1.01
8	How satisfied are you with library outreach programs	78 (23.2)	81 (24.1)	112 (33.7)	64 (19)	2.52	1.05
9	How satisfied are you with institutional collaborations for access	100 (29.7)	116 (34.5)	74 (22.1)	46 (13.7)	2.80	1.01
10	How satisfied are you with learning support for students with disabilities	63 (18.7)	141 (42.1)	71 (21.2)	60 (18)	2.62	0.99
11	How satisfied are you with financial aid for digital access	62 (18.6)	66 (19.6)	153 (45.8)	54 (16)	2.41	0.97
12	How satisfied are you with ICT infrastructure	72 (21.5)	116 (34.9)	86 (25.8)	60 (17.8)	2.60	1.02

The satisfaction levels of marginalised distance learners with the library's strategies and initiatives reflect mixed experiences. Learners expressed the highest satisfaction with flexible borrowing and delivery of print resources ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.77$), followed by access to open educational resources ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.96$). However, satisfaction with digital literacy training was the lowest ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.90$), reinforcing concerns about the effectiveness of such training. Additionally, financial aid for digital access also received a low satisfaction score ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.97$), suggesting a need for more support in helping disadvantaged learners afford digital resources. While some strategies and initiatives are effective, others require significant improvement to ensure greater satisfaction and accessibility for learners.

Research Question 3: How do the strategies employed by the National Open University of Nigeria Library address the information needs of disadvantaged distance learners?

Table 3: Strategies employed Noun Library address the information needs of disadvantaged distance learners.

SN	Item	SA	A	SD	D	$\bar{X}$	SD
1	The library provides access to community study centers equipped with internet and library resources to support disadvantaged learners.	88 (26.3)	115 (34.7)	95 (28.4)	36 (10.6)	2.76	0.96
2	The library offers mobile library services (e.g., mobile vans or digital delivery) to reach learners in remote or underserved areas.	72 (21.5)	116 (34.9)	86 (25.8)	60 (17.8)	2.60	1.02
3	The library collaborates with local community organizations and institutions to improve access to learning resources for disadvantaged students.	80 (24)	124 (37.1)	70 (20.9)	60 (18)	2.67	1.03
4	Assistive technologies and resources are provided to support learners with disabilities in accessing library materials.	63 (18.7)	141 (42.1)	71 (21.2)	60 (18)	2.62	0.99
5	The library provides financial assistance or subsidies to help disadvantaged learners acquire digital textbooks and subscriptions.	30 (8.9)	47 (14.1)	154 (46)	104 (31)	2.01	0.90
6	The library offers training and orientation programs to help disadvantaged learners effectively	66 (19.6)	172 (51.2)	41 (12.1)	3 (17.1)	2.97	0.77

utilize available resources and services.

The Table reveals that the National Open University of Nigeria Library employs various strategies to address the information needs of disadvantaged distance learners, with differing levels of perceived effectiveness among respondents. The most positively viewed strategy is the provision of training and orientation programs, with a high percentage of respondents (around 70.8%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that these programs help learners utilize available resources effectively. This is reflected in the highest mean score of 2.97, indicating strong support for this initiative. Similarly, the establishment of community study centers equipped with internet and library resources is also well-regarded, with approximately 61% of respondents expressing agreement or strong agreement, and a mean score of 2.76. This suggests that the provision of physical access points plays a significant role in supporting disadvantaged learners.

Mobile library services, which aim to reach learners in remote or underserved areas, received moderate support, with about 56.4% of respondents indicating agreement or strong agreement. The collaboration with local community organizations to improve resource access also garnered moderate positive responses, highlighting recognition of partnerships as a helpful strategy. Additionally, providing assistive technologies to support learners with disabilities is viewed favorably, with a majority of respondents (around 60.8%) supporting this initiative. However, the strategy that received the least support was the provision of financial assistance or subsidies, with nearly half of the respondents (46%) disagreeing and a low mean score of 2.01. This indicates that financial aid remains an area needing improvement or is perceived as less accessible or available.

Overall, the findings suggest that while the library effectively employs several strategies such as training programs, community centers, and collaborations that are positively perceived by learners, there are gaps in areas like financial support. Addressing these gaps could enhance the library's ability to meet the diverse needs of disadvantaged distance learners more comprehensively.

Discussion of Findings

The results show that some strategies employed by the National Open University Library are more effective than others in addressing the information needs of marginalised distance learners. Open Educational Resources (OERs) and virtual reference services, such as online chat and email consultations, received relatively high mean scores of 2.98 and 2.99, respectively. This suggests that many learners find these resources useful in accessing academic materials and seeking support remotely. Flexible borrowing and delivery services also performed well ($M = 2.88$), showing that students value the ability to access physical resources despite studying from a distance. However, digital literacy training received a lower mean score ($M = 2.59$), indicating that many learners may struggle with the skills

needed to navigate and use electronic resources effectively. This suggests a need for more comprehensive training programs to enhance students' ability to use digital tools efficiently.

The analysis of initiatives shows that expanding ICT infrastructure, such as internet hotspots and public-access computers, is among the more effective approaches ($M = 2.97$). The establishment of community study centres with internet access also received a relatively high rating ($M = 2.76$), showing that learners appreciate having physical spaces where they can access digital resources. On the other hand, financial aid for digital access recorded the lowest score ($M = 2.01$), suggesting that many marginalised learners struggle to afford digital textbooks and subscriptions. Institutional collaborations for improved access to learning materials received a moderate rating ($M = 2.60$), indicating that while partnerships exist, there is room for further development. These findings suggest that while some strategies and initiatives are meeting learners' needs effectively, there is a need for improvements in financial support, digital literacy training, and institutional partnerships to ensure better access to information resources.

The table indicates that the National Open University of Nigeria Library employs various strategies to meet the needs of disadvantaged distance learners, with training and orientation programs being the most positively perceived, evidenced by the highest support and mean score. Community study centers and collaborations with local organizations also received moderate approval, highlighting their importance in providing physical access and resource support. Mobile library services and assistive technologies for learners with disabilities garnered moderate support as well. However, financial assistance or subsidies received the least support, suggesting that this area needs improvement. Overall, while strategies like training, community centers, and partnerships are appreciated, addressing the gaps in financial aid could further enhance the library's effectiveness in supporting disadvantaged learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicate that while the National Open University Library has implemented several effective strategies and initiatives to support marginalised distance learners, there are areas that require further improvement. Open Educational Resources, virtual reference services, and flexible borrowing options have been well-received, demonstrating their importance in bridging the accessibility gap. However, lower ratings for digital literacy training and financial aid for digital access suggest that many learners still face challenges in utilizing electronic resources effectively. Strengthening institutional collaborations, expanding financial support, and enhancing training programs could further improve information access and ensure a more inclusive learning experience for marginalised distance learners.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. National Open University of Nigeria librarians should broaden its financial support by establishing partnerships with government agencies and non-profit organisations to

enhance access to digital textbooks, data subscriptions, and essential learning resources for marginalised distance learners.

2. National Open University of Nigeria library should enhance institutional partnerships with public libraries, research institutions, and digital repositories to give students greater access to a wider range of academic resources beyond the university library.
3. National Open University of Nigeria Library to develop and expand targeted financial assistance or subsidy programs for disadvantaged distance learners, as addressing this gap could significantly improve access and support for those who currently face financial barriers.

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