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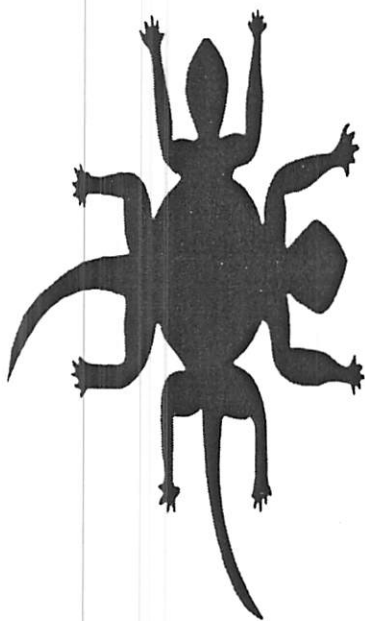
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AN EVALUATION OF THE INFORMATION LITERACY COURSE FOR UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST DISTANCE LEARNERS

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Abstract

This paper looks at how the Information Literacy course, run by the University of Cape Coast College of Distance Education is helping the students in their search for information in all formats. The study was designed to evaluate the course, using a questionnaire. Post-Diploma students were used because the course is run for these categories of students. Findings of the study indicated that most of the students were only familiar with public libraries, and the rest academic libraries. The students felt the course was relevant to them but wanted practical hands-on sessions in addition to the normal face-to-face session. It was concluded that students should be given orientation on the use of the library and the chance to visit some of these libraries. Recommendations proffered include the speeding up of the establishment of a Digital Library for distance students.

Keywords: *Evaluation, Information literacy, Distance Education, University of Cape Coast*

Introduction

The advent of distance learning/education has yielded significant benefits to both students and educational institutions. With the ever-growing qualified applicants that seek regular university education, coupled with the slow pace of expansion of existing facilities in educational institutions, it would have certainly been difficult to meet the needs of all prospective students in a given academic year. With the advent of the information age, the desire for higher education, and the lack of space in tertiary institutions have brought about the need for distance, part-time, and sandwich education opportunities. This innovation has afforded people the convenience of acquiring university education often without the necessity of having a physical interface with their parent institution.

With enthusiasm for education, society has increased the demand for continuing education. The distance education strategy has been designed to meet the criteria of feasibility, affordability, high skills and flexibility. It is intended to complement the traditional delivery of education and increase expectation about corporate social responsibility with a wide variety of values and morals at the work place (Garrison, 1990).

Singh (1997) identified distance education as an educational approach which helps to bring education to the doorsteps of a large and varied clientele who cannot benefit from the conventional system of education. This suggests that distance education enlarges educational opportunities by capturing into its fold persons who could not access education due to certain constraints in their life and/or in the conventional system of education. Keegan (1997) concludes that "the major goal of distance education is to provide courses anytime and anywhere there are students". This approach to education can indeed serve the educational needs of individuals who are still out of the corridors of the conventional system of education for whatever reason.

Steiner (2002) sees Distance Education (DE) as an institutional delivery mode that does not constrain the students to be physically present in the same locations as the instructor. Put differently, Owusu-Boateng (2005) believes that Distance Education caters for all types of people regardless of their age, gender, citizenship, social standing, commitment, social responsibilities and geographical location. Also contributing to its flexibility, Magagula (2003) considers Distance Education as being suitable for workers who wish to upgrade and update their professional qualifications and cannot afford to give up their jobs to attend face to face learning in conventional institutions. Koomson (2001) shares in the cost-benefit of the distant education option by suggesting that "under the right circumstances, distance education can prove cheaper than the other alternatives. Without the need to leave one's home to spend a semester or a year in a distant city, one can substantially save on transportation, housing and food costs". In Ghana, the distance learning concept has been embraced by virtually all tertiary institutions – Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and Universities – with some acting as local agents for some foreign universities offering such services.

With the library seen as the heart of every academic institution, the critical issue then becomes the level of utilization of library resources and services by distance learners. By virtue of their unique residential status, it pays to believe that differences will exist in the utilization of library resources between distance learners as opposed to regular resident students. A greater majority of distance students reside in areas far from the existence of academic libraries and even community libraries.

This, coupled with inadequate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities, further worsens their quest to access academic resources.

Some studies conclude that most universities do not adequately provide for the library needs of distance students (Mabawonku, 2004; Aramide & Ayankola, 2008). Confirming this stance, Boadi and Letsolo (2004) revealed that students' sources of information are colleagues, personal collection and family members. They use the on-campus library resources less because access to them is not easy. One such means to bridge to the gap is the information literacy course to usher students to the rudiments of information literacy.

The library, as part of its mission of providing information support service for teaching, learning and research, offers a liberal course in Information Literacy for the first year regular students and Post-Diploma students on the distance learning programme.

With traditional library service, students go to the library to access the range of services to satisfy their learning needs. The information literacy course run for the Distance Students is to help the students maximize their academic and intellectual potentials. It has therefore become necessary to evaluate the course to determine if the objectives are being met.

Much as institutions providing distance learning services may have good intentions and policies, there is the need to conduct an empirical study regarding the information needs and also, find out the adequacy of the available library services to their students.

Previous Studies on Information Literacy

Information literacy (IL) is a body of knowledge, skills, competencies and understanding required by an individual to find information effectively and use it appropriately to meet the need that prompted its acquisition (Thomas, 2004). The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) believes IL forms the basis for lifelong learning since it is common to all levels of education disciplines, and learning environments, allowing learners to master control over their own learning (ACRL, 2000).

Some institutions have successfully included information literacy experience as an integrated component of a lower division general education programme (Rockman, 2004) due to impact on academic performance suggested by numerous studies. For example, at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, it has been established by Rockman (2004) that after completing the course, students were better prepared for upper-division work. In particular, graduate students of the institution especially benefitted by successfully completing their research and writing requirements and using their expertise to forge research connections within their academic disciplines.

Kunaka (2000) argues that information literacy programmes are more effective than standalone programmes since the former is comprehensive enough. In a study of users of the academic database, it was revealed that 50% of the users were not willing to search for information on their own because even though prior training was offered, it was not comprehensive enough to achieve the desired outcome. It was recommended that information skills training had to be made

compulsory.

Narrowing it to Ghana, and to the University of Cape Coast, Afful-Yeboah (2003) argues that regular students of the university who were introduced to the Information Retrieval Course (now Information Literacy Skills) in the first year benefitted in the use of the library and its facilities more than those who took the course in their third year. The first year students became independent library users because the course deals with the conventional library skills as well as aspects of information technology including basic computer skills and how to use the internet to search for information. In a similar vein, Armah (2003) posits that the use of information technology in university libraries enhances academic and research work more especially when the library client is information literate. Similar studies by Khasseh *et al.*, (2009) confirmed this assertion. It emerged in these studies that the internet and electronic resources were the influential factors in distance education, especially where students had access and training on how to use them.

The adequacy of the library in distance education programmes in making students self-sufficient has been questioned by some studies. In a survey by Bampo (2008) in the University of Cape Coast, it emerged that most of the Distance Education students perceived the library and its services as not supportive of their various courses. To a majority of the respondents, apart from the information literacy course run for them at their monthly face to face sessions, they had neither entered academic libraries nor used academic libraries before. The only instances they used anything technological were when they visited internet cafes to browse as well as send and receive mails.

However, information literacy cuts across all disciplines, all kinds of learning situations and educational levels, and forms the basis for lifelong learning. It is even more important for distance learners who do not have the opportunity of face-to-face interaction with information professionals.

The University of Cape Coast Context

The University of Cape Coast was established in 1962, to primarily train graduate professional teachers for the country's second cycle institutions and assist in meeting the accelerated manpower needs of the nation at the time (University of Cape Coast, 2003). Its mission was to produce highly qualified teachers with opportunities to enhance the quality and output of teachers, and also to train and raise the professional competence of serving teachers at all levels of education in the Ghana Education Service.

With the growing number of people being attracted to the university's academic programmes, coupled with the university's inability to expand physically to absorb such a growing number, the distance education option was introduced to assuage the problem. This was in harmony with a growing national concern where the conventional or traditional campus-based education system could no longer cope with the extremely high demand for higher education. Again, with the demand for teachers at the basic schools far outstripping supply, the Ministry of Education decided to adopt measures to improve teachers' instructional efficiency, and one best approach to enhance the knowledge and professional attitude of teachers (both trained and untrained) was through

higher education by distance (CCE, 2006).

The College of Distance Education (CoDE) was established in 1997 to run conventional programmes of the University in a distance mode as a result of the need to expand access to meet the high demand for university education (VC's Report, 2010). The College has since gone by its mandate to provide greater access to tertiary education for all categories of workers in Ghana to obtain diplomas and degrees in both Education and Business Studies.

With an initial intake of seven hundred and fifty (750) basic school teachers, the College currently serves over 33,087 teachers, accountants, and administrators among others, in forty-eight study centres throughout the country. Although the practice of distance education exists in other tertiary institutions, that of UCC stands tall in terms of its operation which is done through modules and monthly face-to-face interactions. The College of Distance Education runs fourteen programmes country wide for both diploma and degree levels as well as Master's Degree in ICT, mainstream education and business. Ashanti region has the highest student population whilst the Upper West Region has the least (VC's Annual Report, 2013). Since 2006, CoDE has pursued a decentralization process by establishing regional offices to enhance monitoring of tutorial activities, and to cater for the needs of students as regards rendering of effective counseling services.

Although many consider the library to be the hub of the university, the use of the library is often not incorporated into courses being prepared for distance delivery. While the regular students start the Information Literacy course in the first year when they are admitted to pursue various courses in the university, the distance students are made to take the course at the Post- Diploma level. The course basically deals with:

- The meaning of Information Literacy
- Types and functions of libraries
- Library resources and their uses (in print and electronic formats).
- The role of the library in the academic community, and
- Introduction to computers and information resources on the internet.

The specific objectives of the course are to:

- Enable students to appreciate the role of the library in the academic community (i.e. how the library supports teaching, learning, research and extension activities in the university);
- Explain to students the resources and search tool of the library (the manual and digital) and their use;
- Teach students how to access, retrieve, and evaluate information from the internet for their academic work, and later in their working life as well as personal development; and
- Equip students with skills that will enable them to manage and use online journals and other electronic resources.

Distance students, unlike their regular counterparts, are only rushed through the first three items, with emphasis on the print format. Again, though the university library has developed a comprehensive orientation programme for fresh regular students, distance education students do not have the privilege of going through this orientation. What makes this situation worth the

attention is the fact that many of these distance students may not have used libraries before and may not even know what collections and services the library can offer them. Meanwhile, information is now available in different formats and there is, therefore, the need to teach students how to access, retrieve and evaluate it with some efficiency in all these formats. It is for this purpose that the researcher decided to evaluate the course and see if it is really achieving its main objectives.

The purpose of the study is to:

- Find out the adequacy of the curriculum
- Identify issues that do not help distance students to become information literates

Data and Methods

The study was centred on three of the ten regional study centres. The centres were Cape Coast, Takoradi, and Accra. There are no specific reasons for choosing these centres other than their proximity and easy accessibility to the researcher. This situation was necessary to facilitate effective administration and retention of questionnaires.

A total population of 240 post Diploma students (comprising 120 Business and 120 Education) were used. A letter was attached to a questionnaire and sent to the regional tutors to be administered on the researcher's behalf. By virtue of this strategy, all the questionnaires were answered and returned, leading to a response rate of 100%.

A survey questionnaire consisting of open and closed-ended questions was developed. The questionnaire was designed to find out whether the Information Literacy course was having any positive impact on students' information seeking skills.

A five-point Likert-type scale was used for questions that would measure general knowledge on the types of libraries, awareness of library orientation for students and their satisfaction in the use of libraries they were aware of. Other questions asked were stions on the use of libraries and what prompted them to use a library. Demographic information collected included gender, programme being pursued, and their level of study. In addition, respondents were asked to provide information on the duration of the course, how long they spend in obtaining information, relevance of the course and to state what they do not like about the course and finally what they think should be done to improve the course.

The validity of the questionnaire was established by giving it first to the chief examiner of the Information Literacy Course to review the items. Also, four course tutors from other regional centres were given the questionnaires to scrutinize. Their inputs were used to revise the questionnaire and they were administered before the end of the 2013/2014 second semester. The SPSS version 18 was used to analyze the data. The data was run as frequencies and percentages for easy interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The first three questions dealt with the respondents' bio-data and information about their use of libraries in general. The other questions covered types of libraries the respondents had used, why they used those libraries and their impressions about the information literacy course. As earlier stated, the study engaged 240 respondents from three different study centres, of which 124 (51.7%) were males and 116 (48.3%) were females.

Understandably, most students do not think about library service until they encounter a problem or realize that they do not know how to use the library and its resources effectively. In fact, a study by Brown, Murphy and Nanny (2003) revealed that students who are able to find information about their topic on the internet think they are information literate. In the case of these respondents, they had been taught the five types of libraries available - public, academic, special, national and school libraries - to let them know that, even though they are distance learners, they have an array of libraries to contact or visit. Thus, the questionnaire asked them to state the types of libraries they had used.

Table 1: Types of libraries used by students

Types of libraries	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Academic	54	22.5
Public	168	70
Both libraries above	18	7.5
Total	240	100.0

Source: Field survey (2014)

As already stated, all the participants were Post Diploma students. They all responded that they had not had any library orientation because there was no such programme for them. Exactly 70% of the students said they used only public libraries because it is the only type of library they can have access to. Also, 54 respondents, representing 22.5% used academic libraries and the rest (7.5%) used both public and academic libraries. Students' use of public libraries is, therefore, high. Regarding what prompted them to use a library, a vast majority said "to do their private studies". It also came out that most of the students had little knowledge about libraries and their uses before they enrolled as distance learners. It also came out that they did not really know how to look for relevant information within the shortest time although this is one of the aims of the information literacy course.

Table 2: Use of library

Response	Number	Percentage (%)
A great deal	112	46.6
Somehow	58	24.3
Little or Non	70	29.1
Total	240	100.0

Source: Field survey (2014)

The researcher sought to find out how the information literacy course helped in students' use of a library. A majority (46.6%) of the respondents indicated that the course had helped them a lot. Also, 24.3% of the respondents said the course had somehow helped them. In congruence with this study, many studies have shown the positive effect of information literacy skills on students' academic performance (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Mokhtar, Majid & Foo, 2008). Mokhtar, Majid, and Foo (2008), for instance, give evidence that information literacy training made a difference in students' knowledge and skills and also contributed to the quality of students' project work. Watson and Cassell (1999) also observe of distance learners at the University of West Indies that, prior to their enrollment on the information literacy course, many of them were surface and teacher centred learners. However, after completing the Information Literacy programme, the students were better equipped to be deep learners and lifelong learners, while being critical thinkers. This finding corroborates what the UCC students have said about the course as shown in the findings above.

Table 3: Level to introduce the Information Literacy course

Response	Accra		Cape Coast		Takoradi		Total	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Diploma Level	61	25.3	71	30.0	49	20.5	182	75.8
Post Diploma Level	17	7	20	8.5	11	4.5	48	20.0
Others	-	-	11	4.2	-	-	10	4.2
Total	78	32.3	102	42.7	60	25.0	240	100

Source: Field survey (2014)

To get respondents opinion about the level of study in which the IL course should be introduced, the majority of the respondents 75.8% stated that they felt the most appropriate level was the first year of the diploma level. In contrast, 20% percent felt the right stage was at the Post Diploma Level. Meanwhile, 10% of the respondents stated that such a course should be taught in the

secondary schools. Like the UCC, the library of the Flinders University in South Australia, is committed to providing library skills and information literacy training for all commencing undergraduate students, and to all other students on request. At the University of Ballarat, Victoria, the library investigated the perceptions of first year undergraduate students about the information literacy course and concluded that the course was necessary for students to succeed in the University.

Respondents were again asked how they find information for their assignments, quizzes, and examination. A majority of them stated that they were never able to have enough time to use their libraries because of their work schedules. What they usually did was to consult their course modules and sometimes try to navigate the internet to find out whether they could get some information.

This finding runs contrary to Tang and Tseng (2013) whose research revealed that distance education students were willing to spend some time shaping their library skills through instruction webinars. The students spent time to build their competence and confidence about their IL skills because they believed that it could provide them with high accessibility and flexibility for gathering information to undertake information problem solving activities and easily become self-regulated learners (Tang & Tseng, 2013). This suggests that librarians or libraries should offer instruction in a variety of formats suitable to reach distant learners.

Table 4: Relevance of the course

Response	Accra		Cape Coast		Takoradi		Total	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Very relevant	59	24.4	61	25.6	72	30	192	80
Just relevant	5	2	7	3	13	5	25	10
Not relevant	12	5	7	3	4	1.6	23	9.6
Total	76	31.4	75	31.6	89	36.6	240	100

Source: Field survey (2014)

On the relevance of the course, 80% of the respondents stated that it was very relevant, and 18.5% said it was just relevant. However, 95% of them wanted the course to have a practical session where they can be taught how to look for information online. They also wanted to have the

opportunity to visit academic libraries to have some hands-on experience on how to look for information manually and electronically. This outcome is in harmony with a study of post graduate diploma students in Primary Care and Family Medicine in the University of West Indies by Hosein (2001). It did emerge that providing distance students with information literacy skills was good and necessary to satisfy lifelong information needs. Also, in a general survey of Australian university students, the general perception held by level 100 students was that the information literacy course was necessary for one to succeed in the university

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes, based on the findings, that the information literacy course, which is run by the CoDE to improve students' information use competencies, is not making the desired impact. This stems from the fact that the practical approach needed to augment the face to face sessions are lacking, resulting in most students not having any library experience. It is, therefore, safe to expect that the information literacy course can help students become lifelong learners if they are taught, as a matter of urgency, how to use various library tools and equipped with the basic skills that would enable them to retrieve relevant information within the shortest possible time.

Again, the researcher agrees with Brown *et al.* (2003) that students would need typical instruction which includes researching skills in online catalogues and databases and other electronic resources as well as making better use of the internet search, which will allow students to accurately identify relevant information from all sources.

This study believes that the University of Cape Coast library should speed up the establishment of their Digital library for Distance Education students. This library will introduce the distance students to the institution's online resources for finding books and articles as well as helping with issues such as proper citation and how to avoid plagiarism and so forth.

Prior to the attainment of the digital library concept, this study recommends that much as the college has adopted some study centres to serve as points of meeting students for interactions, some public libraries could also be adopted to designate some sections to distance education students. Here, the Online Public Access Catalogue should be made available via the World Wide Web where students could go and access information to which the library has subscriptions or a website where they can find the information they need. This is to say that the College of Distance Education in collaboration with the university library should, in the short term, invest in the operations of some public libraries to address the peculiar needs of distance students in communities where there are no academic libraries. This could be less expensive than having to establish libraries in all study centres.

Furthermore, for the distance students to experience the real impact of the information literacy course, the module should be reviewed to include practical sessions. Students therefore need to master the use of the relevant tools in order to demonstrate their information literacy competencies. All these can be achieved only when the College of Distance Education and the University of Cape Coast library come together to design a programme just like the one for the regular students. This could incorporate a general orientation programme for all Distance Education students immediately they are admitted.

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