After achieving independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has made tremendous progress in many fields. In 1980, there was only one university, the University of Zimbabwe, whereas today there are twelve. This is no mean feat.

Is there such progress in providing, library and information services specifically university, research, and public library facilities?

What is the state of our university libraries?

Are they centres of research?

These are pertinent issues in the delivery of a vibrant university education.

Education in Zimbabwe is a fundamental process and libraries are meant to complement the education process without which much of the education desired can not be achieved. Libraries are powerful agencies available to both conventional and distance education for empowerment and access to information by a diverse student population.

As some professors would say, institutions matter more than individuals. In this view, it is the library, the laboratory, and ICT not the professor that should be respected and honoured.

As such university libraries are dynamic engines for academic business.

However, there are vast differences in the ability of these institutions to provide satisfactory library and information services to an ever increasing student population. Due to inadequate state funding of universities, university libraries have suffered the most. In actual fact there is a crisis in most academic and research libraries. It is pathetic to note that the rapid expansion of higher education services is not supported by vibrant library and information services.

University libraries are faced with the need to provide information services to an increasing number of students, and to cope with huge rises in the cost of books and journals.

Above all, they are also faced with the increasing difficulty in subscribing to core print and electronic journals.

Face to face interaction between students and faculty in classrooms of higher education institutions is traditional and widespread in Zimbabwe.

This conventional system of education cannot accommodate all aspirants, whose numbers are ever increasing. Perhaps, due to the very high proportion of the youth and high appetite of higher education in the country.

This has resulted in devising alternative methods of education to satisfy demand. Hence, in addition to the conventional methods of instruction conducted in the premises of educational institutions, many universities in the country have started offering education programmes to students in off-campus locations.

This phenomenon is common in both public and private institutions. As such off-campus access to electronic information resources is imperative for the success of these programmes.

Distance education appeals to students who for any number of reasons cannot attend classes on campus.

In this view distance learning is empowering thousands of citizens who could not afford university education.

In Zimbabwe, the number of students taking part in parallel, block release and distance learning

courses is increasing every year. And yet the institutions are not providing student support services especially library and information services as well as Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to support this expansion in higher and tertiary education. In this view, to remain viable sources of information, university libraries in Zimbabwe have to make use of emerging electronic information resources.

Although many consider the library to be the heart of the university, the use of the library is not incorporated into courses being prepared for distance delivery.

As such the concept of library services for distance learners is very little discussed in Zimbabwe and the authorities concerned claim that the learning materials supplied to students are exhaustive or comprehensive enough to complete their studies.

Yet library and information services offered by these universities to students are negligible. In actual fact, there is little or no recognition of the central role that libraries play in support of the quality of education or in development of lifelong learning skills such as Information Literacy, ICT literacy and information resource literacy.

All these skills are important in the workplace. Adequate supply of library and information services to distance learners is critical for success of distance learning programmes.

Access to information is difficult and students face difficulties in getting the required information for completing their assignments and examinations. They face the examination without any supplementary reading or core information resources required for their programmes.

A proactive role and re-engineering of library and information services are required, as the learner is not only separated from the institution but also from the library of that institution. Fresh ways to deliver services, based on emerging ICTs, new programme offerings, increasing enrolments and learner needs need to be adopted.

It is the responsibility of each university and its library to provide students with the required resources. The quality of the courses can only be assured by establishing student support

services like library and information support as well as access to new information and communication technologies that allow access to diverse electronic information such as scholarly databases.

Adebayo Olukoshi and Francis B. Nyomnjoh in their editorial to the CODESRIA Bulletin numbers 1 and 2, 2005 argues that ". . . massification with an inadequate infrastructure for learning and an acute dearth in funding, at a time of massive brain drain that has affected the university the most, and a structure of incentives that is unfavourable to advanced research and training has generated numerous difficulties of its own that have become the signposts of decay and decline".

Accordingly, rapid expansions of higher education need to be supported by state-of-the art libraries and ICT infrastructure in order to promote innovation and research culture.

Drawing heavily from Joseph Muema Kavulya in his article, "University Libraries in Kenya: A Study of their Practices and Performance" (March, 2004) "A strategy to develop a university library and information service is therefore a fundamental component of ensuring high standard of the teaching, learning and research process in the university."

As such, there is need to further, assess the existing ICT and library support for distance learning, its availability, appropriateness, and effectiveness and develop methodologies and policies for the provision of library materials and services to distance learning community designed to ensure an equitable service to the off-campus population.

Distance education students are eligible for library services that equal those of the campus-based students. This is evident from the fact that the guidelines provided by various organisations have specifically pointed out this equity issue.

For instance the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Distance Learning Section Guidelines Committee (2004) specifies that "access to adequate library services and resources is essential for the attainment of superior academic skills in post secondary education, regardless of where students, faculty and programs are located".

Due to these reasons distance learning students are entitled to services and resources equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus settings.

As such we have to find new ways and means to provide access to information to this highly dynamic and ever increasing community of information users. One way to improve this situation is through collaboration in the provision of materials and services. Such co-operation can be expedited by government legislation, which could provide financial support for joint planning and innovative programmes across libraries.

This, in turn, would improve information provisions and services in these libraries and benefit distance learners. Quite understandably, these institutions on their own cannot raise sufficient funding to perpetuate the high standard required in effective modern library services.

As such spirited individuals and NGOs should invest in foundations involved in library development.

Another solution can be the aggressive adoption and marketing of web-based library and information services. Electronic journals (e-journals) and e-books can be made available to distance students as well.

Electronic journals offer many advantages, including, speed of access to latest information, quick searching, allow remote access, multi-user capability, ability to incorporate multimedia elements, ability to search across the collection of journals using keywords, security, cross-linking to other databases, full-text articles, and downloading and printing the articles is very easy.

Further, there is an urgent need to craft a National Open Distance Learning policy as this will provide robust mechanisms to support and regulate Open Distance Learning across different sectors and such regulations should include access to state-of-the-art libraries, access to electronic journals through ICTs and Information Literacy Skills training.

Readers need to appreciate that in the absence of policy and clear commitment by institutions

concerned, it is not possible to arrange for optional funding, planning and implementation programmes for the provision of library and information services to distance learning.

In this context, it is essential that providers of distance learning courses give more attention to student support services like access to libraries and information.

This massive expansion of higher and tertiary education without expansion in supporting infrastructure such as well equipped laboratories, state-of -the art libraries and ICTs compromises quality.

In this view, the creation of academic centres for teaching, learning and research cannot be achieved without good library facilities.

An investment of effort in higher education and research needs to be complemented by state-of-the art libraries because university libraries are engines of academic business.

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