



Available Online

Journal of Education and Social Studies

ISSN: 2789-8075 (Online), 2789-8067 (Print)

<http://www.scienceimpactpub.com/jess>

EXAMINE THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS HINDERING DISTANCE LEARNERS' ACCESS TO ACADEMIC LIBRARY RESOURCES

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ABSTRACT

This research evaluates the barriers and challenges towards distance learners' access to academic libraries' physical and digital resources, databases, catalogs, and technological infrastructure, as well as the accessibility of virtual reference services and online tutorials. This research provides practical measures to improve library conditions, assist administrators in formulating effective policies, and benefit library professionals. The study aims to fill the gap in the Library and Information Science literature and contribute to knowledge in the field. A questionnaire was used for a nature of survey, and data was collected from six distance education providing universities in Pakistan selected from the Higher Education Commission HEC- Pakistan website. Two universities discontinued their programs, so data was collected from the remaining four. A sample of 200 students was selected, and 178 responses were received. Two incomplete responses were discarded, and the 176 responses were analyzed using SPSS. Distance education has become more available around the globe, and the number of distance learning students increases day by day. In response to the growing popularity of distance education, libraries and librarians identify their needs and then provide the best available services to these off-campus part-time students.

Keywords: Distance learners; Distance education; Library services for distance learners; Challenges.

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<https://doi.org/10.52223/jess.2023.4342>

Received: September 25, 2023; Revised: December 22, 2023; Accepted: December 28, 2023

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education (DE) is a generic term that includes the range of teaching /learning strategies variously referred to as, 'correspondence education' or 'correspondence study' in both developed and developing countries; as 'home study' or 'independent study' (Keegan, 1994). The university libraries and higher education departments play an active role in providing adequate services for research, learning and teaching for formal and informal education (Ullah & Usman, 2023). The "Standards for Distance Learning Library Services" were initially written and published in 1963 as guidelines for academic libraries to address the diversity of higher education opportunities. With changing requirements and needs of off- and on-campus students, library service trends also updated rapidly (Hill et al., 2013).

Throughout history, libraries and other information centers have adopted new ways of storing, processing and retrieving information. Such information centers are primarily concerned with providing or helping customers meet their information needs. In order to accomplish this goal, every library should devise a strategy which takes advantage of the digital environment in which they operate as well as their current and potential users (Shah & Ahmad, 2016). In the modern age, users have a greater variety of options for accessing information. Information has been transformed drastically by the Internet, which has overgrown. Libraries should adapt to the needs of their target markets in order to be relevant. It is important for

libraries to realize that it is their customers who make them successful (Shah et al., 2021). Different education organizations provide various resources to their off-campus students according to their library budget. Moreover, the strength of distance students versus regular students is also different, according to the various institutions. With the ever-growing opening of informal education throughout the world, information-providing departments rethink and reevaluate the objective and persistence of their resources to remain key points in the students' lives (Huwiler, 2015).

Every individual is facing obstacles and challenges according to his part. In higher education, distance learners also face many problems on many occasions (Usman, 2019). Every challenge has positive and negative aspects in everyone lives. A number of problems associated with library services and resources were encountered, including difficulty borrowing library books, poor internet connectivity, difficulty obtaining study materials, and geographical isolation. In addition, the authors reported that learners were unable to interact with library staff and they lacked IT tools "such as computers, smartphones" in order to use the library support services effectively. Bashorun and others conducted another study. According to the researchers, there were several factors that affected distance learners' use of library support services (Bashorun et al., 2021). Through Internet communication systems and the use of the latest technologies, information centers store and manage human knowledge. Information managers serve society by dispersing the work of others, categorizing and preserving knowledge regardless of location or distance (Shah et al., 2023).

A study carried out by Mahmood and others shows that teachers face a lack of resources so, resulting in a communication gap among teachers and students, and teachers are unable to provision proper responses for solving student problems. Thus, it can be concluded that the curriculum may be designed in a way that overcomes social, organizational, and personal obstacles in the most effective manner (Mahmood et al., 2015). Primarily, the current digital environment does not disadvantage students because all universities are facing the challenge of understanding the implications of the shift from print to digital. Those conclusions may be reassuring to other institutions contemplating the future of digital libraries (Nurse et al., 2018).

In a study, major challenges faced by these institutions are the storage cost of infrequently used materials, which accumulate when these libraries try to become self-sufficient, the need to serve constituencies which have not been served yet, and the difficulty of recruiting and retaining skilled personnel trained in the field. Despite the fact that all of these issues are not new, they have become more serious over the years and have reached critical proportions in the last few years (Kargbo, 2001).

In her article, Robinson noted that some of these problems, such as providing digital materials and authenticating user access, may not be within the control of libraries. It may be necessary to collaborate with other institutions to resolve other problems, such as converting print materials to digital format and protecting the intellectual property rights of authors and publishers. However, some issues, like staff familiarity with computer technologies or willingness to work in an online environment, can only be addressed by librarians (Robinson, 2002). Another study reveals that respondents encounter a few constraints when accessing library information resources. The library does not provide distance learning services (such as registration and loaning), there is insufficient information on materials needed, obsolete information, and the respondents are unable to locate information materials needed, among the ten constraints identified in the study. These constraints included insufficient information about materials needed, inadequate information and inadequate information on materials needed (Nduka, 2013).

A study concluded that UGLS library orientations for distance learners impact library awareness and use. Due to the challenge, distance learners may underutilize library resources when they enroll in distance programs. A major barrier for distance learners is geographical isolation. Moreover, students in remote locations face limitations in engaging with library staff to acquire study materials and borrow library resources. Consequently, individuals participating in distance learning may experience a sense of

inadequacy, insecurity, and diminished confidence. In light of these challenges, the researcher investigated the extent of accessibility to academic library services for distance learners. The findings affirm that geographical isolation contributes to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity regarding library resources for those engaged in distance learning (Owusu-Ansah & Bubuama, 2016).

A study's findings revealed that students are no longer benefiting from the study materials deposited in these libraries. It may be the result of a weak working relationship between the two institutions, primarily due to the failure to renew the contract, making it difficult to deposit further study materials at the public libraries. Students' ignorance of the facilities and services at their local public libraries may also be the result of poor public relations or poor communication between university staff and students (Nabushawo et al., 2016). Just like in the recent past, we faced the Covid-19 pandemic, which created so many problems but also some opportunities in education, learning and libraries. A study conducted by Zhou under the title "The role of libraries in distance learning during COVID-19". Among students and teachers, this study found that distance learning is confronted with obstacles, including a conservative view of education and a distrust of innovations. It may be possible to solve this problem by acquiring positive experiences of distance learning and using online libraries (Zhou, 2022).

The researcher collects the main themes from the literature to establish a research model (Figure 1) for the formulation of research objectives.

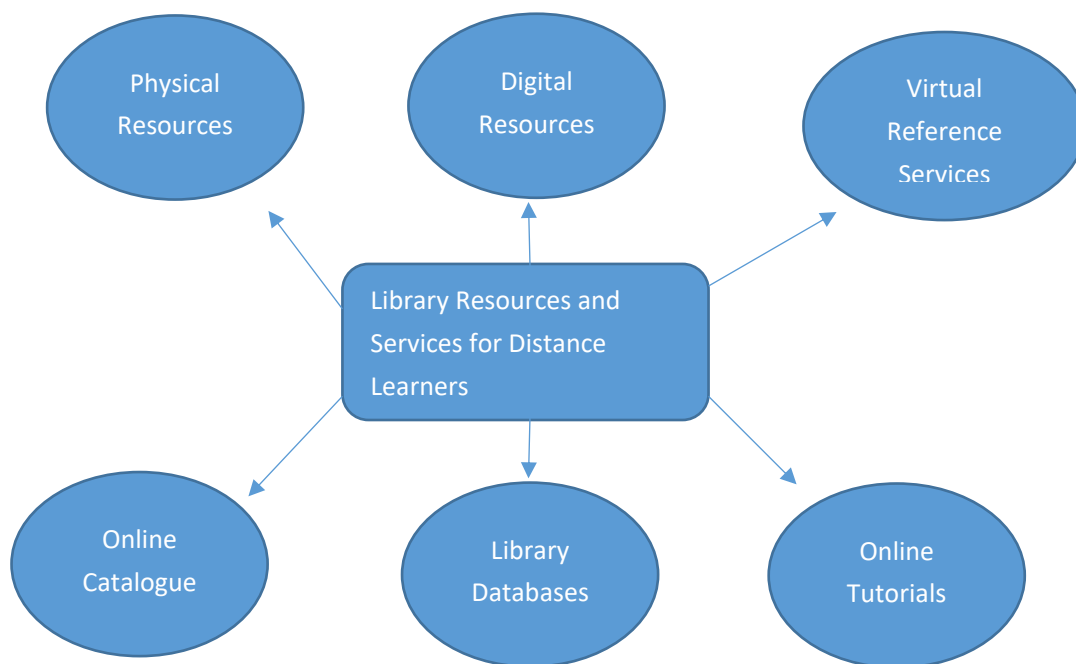


Figure 1. Library resources and services available for distance learners.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of the study are formulated with the help of (Figure 1) developed through a review of related literature.

1. To explore the difficulties distance learners encounter when trying to access academic libraries' physical and digital resources.

2. To assess the ease of accessing library databases, catalogs, and other resources via current technological infrastructure.
3. Assess the accessibility and availability of virtual reference services, online tutorials, and distance learning assistance offered by academic libraries.

Research Questions

1. What are the difficulties faced by distance learners when trying to access academic libraries' physical and digital resources?
2. How easy to access the library databases, catalogs, and other resources via the current technological infrastructure?
3. How easily accessible are the available virtual reference services, online tutorials, and distance learning assistance offered by academic libraries?

METHODOLOGY

According to Blaxter et al. (2010), it stresses the usage of a large-scale sample of the population and generalizes the results of a sample to the whole population. This study is based on a survey method for the collection of relevant data and collected the personal credentials of all the related population regarding their academic qualification and needed information as well. A quantitative research approach was adopted to achieve the objectives of the study and address the research questions. The most appropriate data collection tool for such a nature survey is a questionnaire. The questionnaire is more appropriate than an interview for a large and scattered population. In order to meet the research purpose and objectives, a self-structured questionnaire was developed based on literature related to the topic.

Six universities offering distance education programs are selected from the Higher Education Commission HEC- Pakistan website. The selected universities are Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, Virtual University Lahore Pakistan, International Islamic University Islamabad, Comsats University Islamabad Virtual Campus, University of Peshawar, and Gomal University Dera Ismail Khan. During a self-visit for data collection, it was identified that two of the universities, International Islamic University Islamabad and Gomal University Dera Ismail Khan, discontinued their distance education programs. So, the researcher collected data from the remaining 04 universities. A sample of 200 students (50 from each university) is selected through a convenient sampling technique. The questionnaire is distributed through self-visits and an online data collection method (via email) as well as physical forms. A total of 178 responses have been received. 02 of the incomplete responses are discarded and the 176 responses are analyzed through the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Different statistical tests in the shape mean, standard deviation and percentage were used to analyze the collected data. With the help of figures and tables, the outcomes are shown and expressed.

Demographic Information

The results in Table 1 indicate that out of a total of 176 respondents, 107 (60.8%) were male and 69 (39.2%) were female. The percentage shows that the male students are in greater numbers than female students. Table 1 also indicates that the majority of the respondents, 48 (27.2 %), are from Allama Iqbal Open University, and most of the respondents are from the University of Peshawar (26.8 %). Just 21.6% of the respondents are from Comsats University Virtual Campus. The results also demonstrate that the majority of the respondents, 122(69.3%), are studying in the master's degree program, and most of the respondents are studying in bachelor degree program (30.7 %).

Table 1. Respondents' demographic information (N-176).

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Male	107	60.8
Female	69	39.2
Total	176	100.0
<i>University</i>		
Allama Iqbal Open University	48	27.2
Comsats University Virtual Campus	38	21.6
Virtual University	43	24.4
University of Peshawar	47	26.8
Total	176	100.0
<i>Program of study</i>		
Bachelor Degree	54	30.7
Master Degree	122	69.3
Total	176	100.0

Statistical Analysis

The respondents were asked to evaluate the issues and challenges faced by distance learning programs through the provided statements based on five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Difficulties Faced by Distance Learners Towards Accessing Academic Library Resources

The respondents were asked to mark the most appropriate option on the given scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The results mentioned in Table 2 indicate that the majority of the respondents agree ($\mu = 3.27, SD = 1.248$) that the main barrier towards accessing library resources is the location of the academic library far away from their residency. The mean score ($\mu = 3.13, SD = 1.155$) indicates that lack of library guidance and lack of orientations are also a barrier towards the usage of library resources. The mean score ($\mu = 2.95, SD = 1.254$) indicates that most of the respondents indicate that the library environment is not comfortable for study. The mean scores ($\mu = 2.91, SD = 1.272$) & ($\mu = 2.76, SD = 1.259$) indicate the non-availability of specific materials and incompetent staff are also indicated as a barrier towards the usage of library resources.

Table 2. Barriers towards usage of library resources.

Statement	Mean	S. D
Academic library location (far from my house).	3.27	1.248
Lack of Library guidance and orientation.	3.13	1.155
Library environment is not comfortable for study.	2.95	1.254
The crowd in the library.	2.91	1.272
Library staff is not competent.	2.76	1.259
Material is not available.	2.64	1.228
Language and culture gap.	2.53	1.385

Scale: 5 = Strongly Agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly Disagree.

Difficulties Faced by Distance Learners Towards Accessing Academic Library Services

The respondents were asked to mark the most appropriate option on the given scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The results mentioned in Table 3 indicate that the majority of the respondents agree ($\mu = 3.39, SD = 1.193$) that the lack of time is indicated by respondents as a barrier towards accessing academic library services. The mean score ($\mu = 3.19, SD = 1.216$) indicates that no information services are designed to support DL at the library. The mean score ($\mu = 2.97, SD = 1.147$) indicates that most of the respondents indicate a lack of library culture in our community as a barrier towards accessing academic library services.

The mean scores ($\mu = 2.96$, $SD = 1.171$) & ($\mu = 2.78$, $SD = 1.326$) indicates the library staff is not cooperative and library fails to market its services among DL stakeholders as a barrier towards the usage of library services.

Table 3. Difficulties faced by distance learners towards accessing library services.

Statement	Mean	S. D
Lack of time.	3.39	1.193
No information services are designed to support DL at the library.	3.19	1.216
Lack of library culture in our community.	2.97	1.147
Library staff is not cooperative.	2.96	1.171
Library fails to market its services among DL stakeholders.	2.78	1.326

Scale: 5 = Strongly Agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly Disagree.

Barriers towards Accessing Virtual and Online References Services and Resources

The respondents were asked to mark the most appropriate option on the given scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The results mentioned in Table 4 indicate that the majority of the respondents agree ($\mu = 3.39$, $SD = 1.373$) that the lack of ICT skills among distance learners is indicated by respondents as a main barrier towards accessing virtual and online reference services and resources. The mean score ($\mu = 3.15$, $SD = 1.215$) indicates that the poor quality of the library website, e.g. frequent stops and limited services, indicated by respondents as the main barrier towards accessing virtual and online reference services and resources. The mean score ($\mu = 3.03$, $SD = 1.273$ & $\mu = 2.92$, $SD = 1.177$) indicates that the lack of internet facilities in your institution's library and lack of digital resources in your institution's library as a barrier towards accessing virtual and online references services and resources.

Table 4. Barriers towards accessing virtual and online references services and resources.

Statement	Mean	S. D
Lack of ICT skills among distance learners.	3.39	1.373
The poor quality of library website: e.g. frequent stops and limited services.	3.15	1.215
I do not know how to get the online information myself.	3.13	1.187
Lack of internet facility in your institution's library.	3.03	1.273
Lack of digital resources in your institution's library.	2.92	1.177

Scale: 5 = Strongly Agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly Disagree.

Discussion

The main aim of this research is to assess the issues and barriers faced by distance learners when trying to access academic libraries' physical and digital resources as well as accessing the library databases, catalogs, and other resources via current technological infrastructure. It also evaluated how easily accessible the available virtual reference services, online tutorials, and distance learning assistance offered by academic libraries. A total of 176 responses are analyzed through the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). The majority of the respondents were male and studying in master's degree programs in the studied universities.

The findings of this study indicate that the location of academic libraries so far from students' homes is the main barrier to their access to library resources. Distance learners have difficulty accessing library resources due to the distance between universities and their residences. Lack of library guidance and orientation also prevents users from taking advantage of library resources. In addition, the non-availability of specific materials and incompetent staff are also indicated as barriers to the use of library resources. The results of a study conducted by Owusu-Ansah and Bubuama (2016) verified the results of this study that distance students face major challenges due to geographical location. Furthermore, distance students cannot interact with library staff/personnel when obtaining study materials and borrowing library

materials. There is a risk that distance learners will feel insufficient, insecure, and lacking in confidence as a result (Owusu-Ansah & Bubuama, 2016).

According to the findings of this study, distance learners point out a lack of time as a barrier to gaining access to academic library services. Distance learners have difficulty accessing academic library services due to the lack of information services designed to support distance learning at the library (Sasso, 2016). The majority of respondents indicated that academic library services are difficult to access because of a lack of a library culture in our community. There is a lack of cooperation among library staff, and the library fails to market its services to DL stakeholders, which respondents also mentioned as barriers to using library services.

The findings of this study revealed that distance learners lack skills in using ICT to access virtual and online resources and services. Respondents reported frequent stops and limited services as the main barriers to accessing virtual and online reference services and resources because of the poor quality of library websites. Findings also indicate that due to a lack of internet access in the library as well as a lack of digital resources, it is difficult to access virtual and online reference services and resources. A study conducted by Shivalingaiah (2022) also verified the findings of this study that there is an urgent need for libraries to educate their users by giving them training that will help them learn how to use the search and access tools provided by libraries, especially online resources, efficiently. Distance learners should be assisted in a better way by the library staff or reference librarians (Shivalingaiah, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study reveal that the primary obstacle to accessing library resources for distance learners is the distance from their homes to academic libraries. Distance learners also face difficulties in interacting with library staff, which can lead to a lack of confidence. Distance learners face barriers to accessing academic library services due to time constraints, lack of information services, community culture, lack of cooperation among staff, and failure to market services. They also lack ICT skills to access virtual and online resources, with frequent stops and limited services due to the poor quality of library websites. The study suggests a need for libraries to educate users on the efficient use of search and access tools and for library staff or reference librarians to assist distance learners better. The study highlights the need for improved library services and resources to help distance learners overcome these challenges and improve their access to library resources.

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