

# Consortium Solutions to Open and Distance Libraries Challenges: Does ZULC Rescue the Students?

Kudzayi Chiwanza, Chipo Mutongi

**Abstract-** *The Zimbabwe Universities Libraries Consortium (ZULC) is continuing to develop cooperative projects to serve both convectional and distance learners. By cooperating rather than competing, Universities and College libraries are developing a package of services available to all academic students in Zimbabwe and to support Open and distance Learning (ODL) programs. This paper describes collaborative efforts to increase information resource access to meet the needs of distance learners and take advantage of changing technologies as well as suggesting other areas that can be collaborated through the consortium.*

**Key words:** *consortium, information, technologies, Open and Distance Libraries, education, knowledge, e-resources, libraries, librarian, Zimbabwe University Libraries Consortium (ZULC)*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Consortium initiative is a call for joint action by member library institutions to contribute to creating a more informative society through the education of future leaders in line with the goals developed by the UNESCO Framework for Action 2030 (United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4), and to solve challenges that face the university students when they get to their institutions' libraries. This study focused mostly on the distance learner. There are two categories of problems facing distance education students in libraries-technological problems and bureaucratic problems. Solving most technological problems is a simple matter of programming but bureaucratic problems, in comparison, can be really difficult to solve. On-campus students face minimal bureaucratic problems when they tackle standard library research tasks such as getting a library card, signing up for a computer account, browsing books on library shelves to select the ones they need, requesting interlibrary loans, attending library instruction short courses, or identifying interesting publications using computer databases. For distance education students, bureaucratic barriers to the same services can be insurmountable. A single barrier can mean the student is cut off from library resources. In addition to students' information access problems, ODL libraries in Africa face each other critical issues, including journal pricing, competition for students and state funds, historic lack of support for library collections, and few librarians with experience serving distance learners.

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These could and only can be lessened by libraries coming together pulling their resources for easy access of information by university students, thus a consortium.

## II. ZIMBABWE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES CONSORTIUM (ZULC)

The Zimbabwe University Libraries Consortium (ZULC) has brought so many benefits which include synergy, collaboration, economies of scale, shared cost, information and knowledge sharing, brand value increase, broadening Prospective, Resource mobilization, capacity Building, technical and training support.

The Zimbabwe University Libraries Consortium (ZULC) was established in 2001 with an initial membership of six university libraries. It was formed to provide leadership in access to knowledge and to promote information resource sharing and networking in support of 'human capital development'. The current membership now includes 15 full members, all universities, in addition to a number of affiliate members, including colleges and polytechnics. The consortium has a formal constitution and clearly specified vision, mission and goals. The consortium is keen to expand membership beyond the traditional university and college members to include NGOs, research institutions and government departments. It is working on a recruitment strategy in order to grow over the coming years.

Chikonzo (2016) in her capacity as the University of Zimbabwe Librarian and country coordinator for INASP and ZULC avers that, "Zimbabwe is one of the few INASP partner countries where the consortium has been self-funded from the start". Since forming in 2001, ZULC has worked with INASP and other international organizations to advocate for funding for e-resources to support national research build organizational capacity and build human capacity among member institutions. ZULC is a consortium existing to serve its members to the best of its ability. Its Chairperson describes it as a "formidable organization whose mandate is to bring together university librarians ... [to achieve common objectives] in the binding spirit of collaboration." ZULC provides and facilitates a variety of benefits to members through collaboration with support from organizations such as INASP. These benefits include the provision of access to affordable e-resource subscriptions to support quality research. ZULC member libraries also intend to have cooperative borrowing agreements, nationwide licensing of databases, shared information literacy courses, document delivery options and cooperative collection development.



The ZULC is a group of 15 academic, libraries, public and private higher education institutions including the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) Library. ZOU has been able to cut through some of the bureaucratic red tape by developing cooperative projects to serve its ODL students. The success of cooperation led ZOU libraries to seek and The following are the benefits brought about by a consortium:

receive a pool of academic library funding on e-resources. These programs help all ZOU students' access to a standardised set of library and information services regardless of what resources their own institution's library can offer.

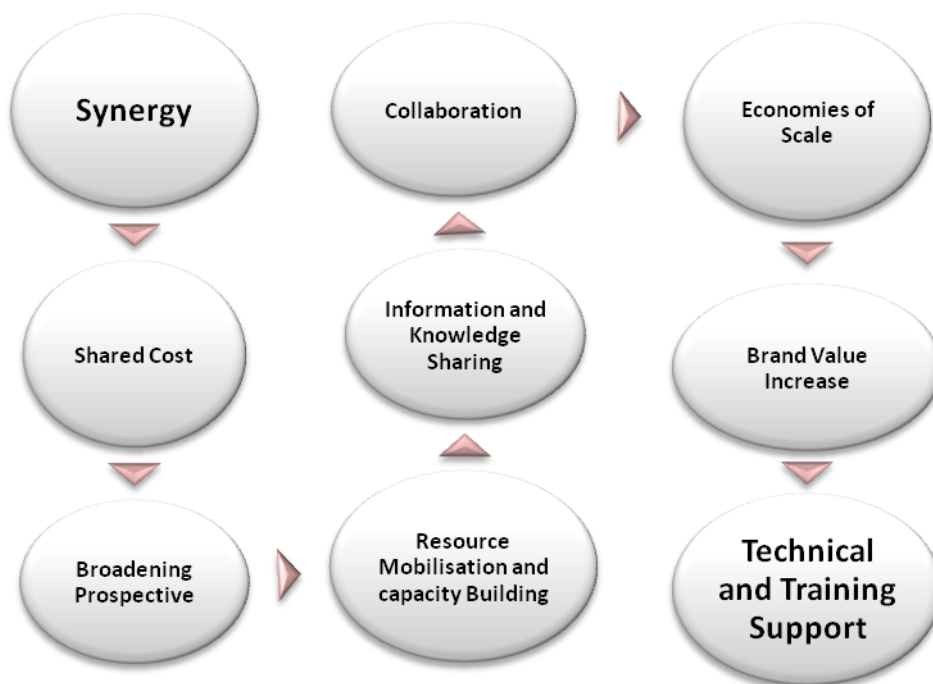


Figure 1: Benefits of a Consortium

### III. OVERVIEW OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE

There is only one university mandated to do ODL and that is ZOU. The libraries serve over 15, 000 students. Chiwanza and Mutongi (2017) allude that, students' Statistics on distance learners are not uniformly reported and obtaining precise statistics is difficult. ZOU has introduced the use of technology in their distance education to enhance education through new and advanced technologies and to address enrollments through technology rather than through building traditional campuses. Goals include using technology to remove "time and place barriers", providing quality access to technology-delivered education, supporting a knowledge-based economy, and changing the focus from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered education.

The University Regional centers' libraries were established to support all programmes offered by the university. There are ten centers around the country that offer degree programs to students who are unable to come to the capital city thus bringing education as well as information to the students' door step. Many distance education students in ZOU have little or no access to interlibrary services. For example, ZOU, did an excellent job of providing library materials from their own collection throughout their regional centres, but did not provide interlibrary services to these students. Remote students usually relied on local public libraries, drove to the nearest academic library, or did without important library materials.

### IV. ZOU HIGHER EDUCATION CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) offers Bachelors and Master's Degree Programmes right up to PhD. A total of more than 40 degree programmes are offered. It is focusing on technological means of delivering courses to accommodate the increase in student population rather than on "bricks and mortar". When faculties programmes are allowed to expand the scope and academic level of their degree programs, libraries have not received a corresponding upgrade in resources to support the new programs, but technology is rapidly increasing the viability of distance information delivery. Continual outreach efforts are needed to keep faculties aware of what library services are offered (Rozum and Brewer, 1997). The number of distance learners is increasing and distance education providers will be major players in Zimbabwe and Africa's higher education future.

### V. ZULC AND LIBRARIES

Whilst, Morrison et al. (2015) noted that there is stiff competition for students between Universities, ZULC libraries have had a strong history of cooperation in terms of e-resources.

In 2001, this spirit of cooperation led ZULC to approach the INASP with a proposal which was a request for shared funding for library information resources and services.

ZULC proposed a combined effort to fight the ongoing battle of journal price inflation and provide more resources for every library than could be purchased by any library acting on its own. Part of the funding will be used for consortium projects to enlarge the pool of information resources available in the country by encouraging the purchase of new titles (print or electronic) not yet held in the country, by discouraging duplicate holdings, and by utilising combined purchases of print and digital books and journals (ZULC, 2015).

INASP collection development initiatives along with pre-testing ZULC consortium projects have built a package of standardised services for all academic students in Zimbabwe. These services support distance education programs and guarantee that ZOU distance education students might have access to a certain level of library resources and services that include: cooperative collection development, reciprocal borrowing, ZULC Article Delivery, online library instruction, and promoting services to faculty and students.

## VI. ACCESS TO ELECTRONIC DATABASES AND FULL-TEXT

The Open University states that it will "offer digital library collections and electronic services selected to serve the needs of students, faculty, and staff regardless of their location, across the country and around the world", Open University, (2005). The databases include periodical indexes and reference sources, as well as access to the archives of the major local newspapers. All ZULC libraries can link from the Web to resources offered. The relative technological simplicity of the Web has made cooperation more practical than previous resource sharing attempts using CD-ROM jukeboxes or tape loads. Consortium availability of e-resources and databases has made it possible for ZOU libraries to collaborate on library instructions.

## VII. STRATEGIES ON HOW ZULC SHOULD GROW IN SERVING THE LIBRARY CONSORTIUM

The ZULC reciprocal borrowing program should be established in order to extend library services to students, faculty, and staff throughout the ZULC academic community. The cooperative borrowing agreement lets a patron from any ZULC library borrow circulating materials directly from any other ZULC library. Patrons may return the materials to the interlibrary loan office of their own library. Valid borrowers are supposed to have proper identification, since many distance education students are not issued official identification cards. To address this problem, the agreement should be to allow patrons to checkout materials with a picture ID and proof of current registration. This program is a cornerstone of a true cooperative collection, and ZULC members should be planning to promote it heavily.

### 1. ZULC Article Delivery (ZAD)

ZULC Article Delivery (ZAD) is a patron initiated, e-mail-based document delivery service developed to speed the delivery of journal articles. The goals of the program should be to:

- Provide article delivery in a time frame defined by patron expectations.
- Promote the notion of a single ZULC academic library collection as opposed to individual institutional collections.
- Serve as a collection development tool by identifying journals that should be part of a nationwide collection.
- Provide interlibrary services and/or document delivery services to students.

Kochan and Elswailer (1998) opine that, a model of patron initiated document delivery had already been tested at Utah State University. Eventually a plan has to be developed in ZULC that allows users to e-mail requests for journal article from a Web-based form and receive the requested articles on their personal machine. Requests come to the ZOU Library where staff looks up ZULC journal holdings on interlibrary loan platform and process requests as follows:

- Requests for articles available at the requestor's home library are canceled.
- If the requested article is available at ZOU, a copy is sent directly to the requestor.
- If the article is unavailable, but available in another ZULC member library, the request is forwarded to that library and filled from there. In all cases, the expectation should be that the requestor will receive their article within two working days or the same day they placed the request.

Users will like the speed of delivery and the option to have materials posted directly to them. ZULC is able to achieve faster turnaround so as to save staff time. Staff time is also saved at the receiving end as articles go directly from the lending source to requestors. In both cases the savings in staff time is felt in improved service to users. In addition, ZOU should generate a database of nationwide requests providing data for future collection development decisions. ZOU data currently indicate a need for better nationwide access to various journal literatures. ZULC should plan to move towards Web delivery of articles in the near future. The remainder of distance education students must go to any ZULC member campus to access the Web form. ZULC should be investigating other means of authenticating users directly from student registration statistics or the patron databases in member libraries' integrated library systems. The other improvement that is needed is a global search of ZULC catalogs.

## VIII. ONLINE LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

In the early 2000 there was a dramatic need across ZOU to teach distance learners and tutors about the Internet. The Internet was quickly becoming a part of everyday life for many people, but few people understood how it evolved, what it was, or how important it would soon become.





ZULC librarians should see this as a universal problem best solved by a consortium instruction initiative. A task force should develop ZOU's Information Literacy course, the "Lifelong learning" (Hansen and Lombardo, 1997); Lombardo, 1998).

The course should be offered for credit beginning in January 2017 at all ZOU regional centres.

It must be used extensively by academic instruction librarians, and students. The Information Literacy Skills should have one module, with its own assignments and examinations. This course has been done successfully by thousands of convectional learners who are ZULC members since 2008.

Most distance learning students and even members of the general public now have a basic understanding of what the Internet is, and how it works. The problem has shifted from the need to teach "what is the Internet, to how to best teach students to use the Internet effectively for research and how to enable patrons to access the many traditional library resources now on the Web", Kochan and Lee (1998). For example, since the advent of the Internet, ZOU's online student population has grown from under 200 to over 2000 students in 2017.

By working to meet the needs of the distance learner, ZULC sees the added benefit of better meeting the needs of many students who increasingly prefer to access library resources off campus. ZULC Librarians should work together to create online instructional units covering shared information resources using the Information Literacy Skills course as an online instruction model. A team of librarians and Web development professionals will collaborate to redesign course modules to focus on information literacy competencies and will add units designed to provide instruction on databases and other shared resources. This team will use the latest Web technologies and newest models for delivery of information skills instruction to the academic community and the citizens of Zimbabwe (ZULC Academic Library Consortium Information for Life Task Force, 1999).

### IX. PROMOTING ZULC SERVICES TO FACULTIES AND STUDENTS

The ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services (Association of..., 1998) identify promoting library services to the distance learning community as a management and administrative responsibility. The World Wide Web offers an excellent opportunity to address the problem of promoting library services to distance learners.

The ZULC home page should offer access to the working documents and services of the organisation. Major headings should provide links to member libraries and their institutions, consortium services. The service component should include Internet access to electronic library resources especially useful to students in distance learning programs and comply with a number of ACRL guidelines. The site should bring together information pertinent to these needs of distance learning students, identify distance learning issues related to librarianship, and offers basic information about distance learning classes and library services nationwide.

The resources page, designed for students and faculty, should be focused and not lengthy. The student page is

identified as a Student Help page. A Resources Available section provides links to online library catalogs, periodicals indexes and databases, Ebsco Alert Service current table-of-contents awareness, and a link to "Citing Print and Electronic Research Sources" that gives examples from several citation manuals. Interlibrary Loan, remote reference service, electronic reserve and remote access to databases unique to their institution comprise the listings in this category. Since the intent is to identify library services nationwide, each service is described and drop down boxes provide links to library services available at each of the ZULC institutions.

Resources for faculty focus on the basics of faculty/librarian collaboration. The page reminds faculty to contact their librarian and offers a list of types of services potentially available to faculty through their library. The list contains suggestions such as: access to library catalogs and databases, reference assistance, reciprocal borrowing, document delivery, and help designing course assignments. The list may seem simplistic to librarians, but in fact, many faculty do not always know what services libraries are currently offering. Following the list, three admonitions are stated: "Get to know your librarian", "Familiarise yourself with library resources", "Familiarise yourself with technology." After each statement a paragraph explains how each relates to their responsibilities as faculty teaching distance education classes.

### X. CONCLUSION

Cooperative consortium programs have helped overcome bureaucratic barriers so that ZULC supported resources and services are equally accessible to on and off-campus students. ZULC has been successful in promoting the idea of nationwide library consortium that expands the information resources available to all students in the country. Cooperation has also been a successful political strategy to gain support for libraries. Technical problems authenticating valid users still prevent some students from getting access to ZULC resources, and other technological problems still exist locally, but in theory every student has access to a wide range of collection and services.

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### Bio-Data



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