

## INTERNET USAGE IN NON-FICTION WRITING: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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### ABSTRACT

*This study assessed the opportunities and challenges that have been brought about by the advent of the Internet services. Since the study was all about the perceptions held by researchers on Internet usage, the descriptive survey design was adopted. Questionnaires and interviews were used to solicit data from the respondents. Data were reported both qualitatively and quantitatively. The study focused on the 130 tutors at the Zimbabwe Open University's 10 geographical regions. Out of this population, a convenient sample of 50 was selected. The study found out that the respondents showed enthusiasm towards use of Internet for various purposes including research and scholarship work. It also established that the Internet was used for research for publication purposes by a sizeable number of the lecturers but the majority of the lecturers used the Internet for research for scholarship work. Though respondents showed a positive attitude towards the use of the Internet, the impact of this use was not being translated into tangible results as only 23 research articles and 4 books had been published among the 50 lecturers over a period of three years. Lack of competence in internet usage and lack of access to blocked but vital documents made it difficult for the faculty members to use the internet. It was therefore recommended that there should be intensive training in Internet usage particularly searching for information from various sources. Though expensive, lecturers are encouraged to purchase USB internet modems for connectivity where the institution is unable to provide connectivity.*

**Keywords:** Internet, non-fiction, opportunities and challenges

### INTRODUCTION

The use of the Internet research has become a significant area of concern as the use of this research platform has increased. The Internet has been adopted for use in various works, both fiction and non-fiction. For Markham (2000), Internet research has focused on 'virtual ethnography. As for Herring (1996) and Sharf (1999), among others, Internet research has focused on linguistic and discourse based analyses of computer-mediated communication. Despite hiccups, the Internet has been adopted at the Zimbabwe Open for a wide variety of uses ranging from social networking to research and scholarship work. It is the extent to which the lecturers have embraced the Internet in research that is of interest to the present research. The study explores the usage of the internet in the various categories of uses and examines the benefits that have been achieved through the use of the Internet as a platform for the various uses. According to the World Bank, the use of ICTs has been dogged by numerous impediments among which are the lack the capacity in financing the ICTs for use in education and the unavailability of manpower to staff develop others in the use of these ICTs. The study therefore goes further to investigate the challenges that lecturers at the

Zimbabwe Open University face in the use of this most invaluable platform as they go about their various daily routines more so in their research studies.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the only state Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe, established on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1999 through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20). Currently, in 2012, ZOU has four faculties; the Faculty of Arts and Education, the Faculty of Science and Technology, the Faculty of Commerce and Law and the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, offering over 60 diplomas and degree programmes. Students are drawn from the country's ten geo-political provinces as well as the Virtual Region encompassing students outside the country, wherever they may be in the world.

It is at this institution where the advent of the Internet as part of Information Communication Technology has brought with it relief to lecturers as they attempt to transform themselves into world acclaimed non-fiction writers. All the ten geo-political regions of the university has hooked to the net and some of the benefits from the look of it would appear to that source documents are provided for in soft copy form not laborious to peruse and these are expeditiously obtained by logging on into the Internet. On the net, the lecturers are confronted with numerous documents for use as reference material. However, though the Internet has been widely used in a wide range of educational and socio-economic activities, not all has been rosy in the use of the facility, and lecturers at the ZOU have not been spared. Hence this study was aimed at unearthing some of the benefits and challenges in the use of the Internet facility at the ZOU as some writers very often have found themselves abstaining from the use of the Internet for one reason or the other.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Limited access to up to date materials in libraries of universities in developing countries is a main problem that impedes research and teaching but with the advent of the Internet, situation is a blessing for non-fiction writers. However, with the Internet facility at the infancy, what are opportunities and challenges that go with the facility among researchers at the Zimbabwe Open University?

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study aimed at addressing the following research question:

1. What are uses to which the Internet is being put by non-fiction writers?
2. To what extent has the Internet positively impacted on the non-fiction writing activities among lecturers?
3. What are the challenges confronting the lecturers in the use of the Internet at ZOU in the 10 regional Centres?
4. How best can the challenges confronting the lecturers be alleviated?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Internet Usage and Its Impact in Various Academic Activities

The Internet is a world-wide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers without regard for geographic location. It is a computer network made up of thousands of computers and networks world-wide. It is an information superhighway that

provides unlimited access to a wealth of information on different topics contributed by people throughout the world (Griffith, 2002; Scholastic, 2003; University Libraries, 2003). Every personal computer, cell phone or other device that people use to look at web sites is also a part of the Internet. The Internet also makes possible email, games and other applications unrelated to the World Wide Web. No one knows exactly how many computers are connected to the Internet (Bull, Bull and Sigmon, 1996). However, Bull, Bull and Sigmon (1996) argue that while the Internet is a powerful and expanding educational medium, there are times when another medium may be more educationally appropriate. Even if you have access to the Internet, web materials that have been transferred to a CD-ROM can be useful for the following reasons: high speed delivery of graphics; no online connection charges and materials can be used even when there are no Internet connections (Bukaliya and Dzimano, 2011). According to Savolainen (1999), the Internet provides access to unlimited sources of information and search engines is continuously being advanced to provide efficient ways to help users to find what they want. The Internet eases and increases access to a large amount of data, saves time and money, and obtains an opportunity to consult several experts with a single request (via discussion groups), and greater independence from specific times and places for information seeking

In Pakistan, Internet has been used effectively in academic institutions and libraries and it is creating an environment that is continuously changing (Bhatti, 2000). This has made the teaching and research functions of faculty members more challenging. According to Bhatti (2000), the important features that have affected the quality of information are accuracy, currency, comprehensiveness and time. Al-Ansari (2006) argues that the Internet is mostly used for communication, research, and publication by saving time, find up to date information, and cooperate with their colleagues.

### **Challenges in the Use of Internet Facilities by Researchers in Institutions**

Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Uwameiye (2006) established that in some countries, government opposition to ICT has been a major factor in limiting Internet access. According to Ghashghai and Lewis (2005), many Middle Eastern leaders view the Internet as a Western-based agent of moral and political subversion. As a result, many countries strictly enforce limits on Internet connectivity. In Egypt and Jordan have been relatively progressive in building Internet connections but countries such as Saudi Arabia have restricted widespread access to the Internet. Internet access is very limited in Syria, and Libya and Iraq prohibit any kind of Internet access. Bahrain and Tunisia openly monitor Internet traffic, and the United Arab Emirates and Yemen use proxy servers that can prevent users from accessing “undesirable” sites. Iran allows access, but the extent of the traffic monitoring in that country is uncertain (Alterman, 2000).

Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Uwameiye (2006) argue that the lack of access to information technology and its requisite skills contributes to an inability to compete in the mainstream economy and mobility to participate meaningfully to civil society. Furthermore, Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Uwameiye (2006) assert that lack of access to information technology impedes success in academic pursuit, the skills necessary to work in knowledge driven society, and ability to prosper in modern society.

According to Adika (2003) challenges to internet usage include lack of access to the Internet and lack of training in internet usage. Al-Ansari (2006) argues that despite the Internet being mostly used for communication slow speed, lack of time, and lack of access from home are the major problems confronting faculty in the use of the Internet. Bhatti (2006) ascribes the

challenges in the use of the Internet to shortage of computers and slow speed of Internet and the shortage of e-books and subscription to e-journals is expensive. Lack of time and inadequate knowledge about information retrieving techniques from Internet was found to be the problem for some faculty members.

### **Internet Competency and Access among Users**

A research by Bukaliya and Dzimano (2011) established that 83% of the full time lecturers at ZOU had 3G internet connectivity and, despite being off line most of the time, all lecturers had access to the library Dialup internet connection. However, the availability of and access to the internet gadgets and being connected, does not necessarily mean competence and usage. Several other researchers have established that having access to ICT and using it in any process are a challenge since the ICT smacks of more problems than solutions (Olaofe, 2005; Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010). Another interesting finding from the same study was that contrary to the findings by Agbatogun (2006), the young breed of lecturers at the Zimbabwe Open University did not access the web/internet more than their elderly lecturers. It would have been expected that this young generation play a leading role in web/internet usage as is the trend when it comes to playing games on the computer.

### **The Relevance of E-Books and Resources Available To the Researchers**

Meier (2000) notes that the Internet becomes very useful given the limited access to up to date materials in libraries of universities in developing countries is a main problem that impedes research and teaching. According to Adika (2003), interlibrary loans and document delivery projects have been inadequate to resolve this problem by themselves and the Internet has made it possible for users to have access to large volumes of information irrespective of their geographical location. Though respondents from the Faculty of Science were more positive about the use of Internet and its impact on their educational experience, all found to be consulting Internet for seeking information for the purposes mentioned above with different percentage. This increased use of Internet may be because of unavailability and inadequacy of latest reading material from the university library.

### **Population and Sample**

The study focuses on all the 130 tutors at the Zimbabwe Open University`s 10 geographical regions. Out of this population, a convenient sample of 50 will be selected based on availability.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The present study was descriptive survey and as such data for this study were solicited through the use of a survey questionnaire which contained both open and closed ended questions. The descriptive survey encompassed faculty members from four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University. Fifty faculty members who were requested to take part in the survey returned the questionnaire giving a 100% response rate. In order to ensure reliability and effectiveness of the instrument, the questionnaire was pilot tested on twenty faculty members from the same faculties.

## **DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION**

Data were grouped and presented in tables and analysed as per themes.

### ***Demographic data of respondents***

The survey received 100% response rate faculty members, all of whom were lecturers. The data shows that all the fifty lecturers hold a Master`s degree and among them, 35 have

enrolled for the Doctor of Philosophy degree with the Zimbabwe Open University and other institutions. Ten of the same are actively involved in research and publication works.

**Table 1. Uses to which the Internet is being put by non-fiction writers (N=50)**

<i>Purpose for accessing Internet</i>	<i>Responses</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Research for publication	32	64
Research for enhancing teaching/learning	35	70
Research for scholarship (PHD/Masters degrees)	45	90
Communication through e-mail and other platforms	28	56
Looking for lecture information	33	66
Recreation, eg. Playing games	11	22
Shopping	1	2

The respondents from all the faculties showed enthusiastic attitude towards use of Internet for various purposes including research and scholarship work. Internet use for research for publication purposes accounted for 32(64%) of the respondents whereas the use of the internet for research for enhancing teaching/learning accounted for 35(70%). Forty-five (90%) stated that they used the Internet for research for scholarship work as they were working towards their PHD and Masters degrees. Communication through e-mail and other platforms accounted for 28(56%) while looking for lecture information accounted for Recreation in the form of games accounted for 11(22%) and lastly, only 1(2%) used the Internet for shopping.

Though respondents showed a positive attitude towards the use of the Internet, the impact of this use should be translated into some tangible results for example an increase in the research and publication works. Pleasing though from the findings is the fact that the majority of the respondents are using the Internet advance their studies. Also it would appear that the lecturers are not into playing games on the Internet, something that academics would not find worthy doing in light of the fact that a lot of research needs to be carried out within the limited time available.

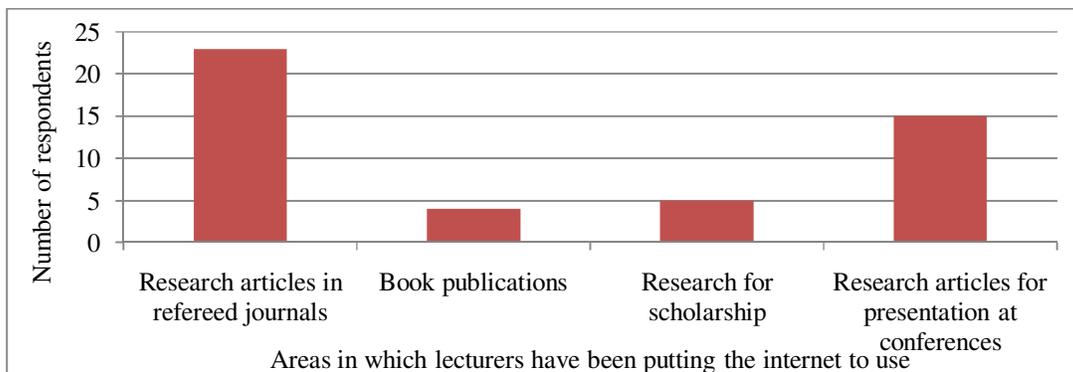


Figure 1. The extent to which the Internet has positively impacted on the non-fiction writing activities among lecturers

In an attempt to come up with tangible figures on the extent to which the lecturers have been using the Internet for academic and scholarly works, the study sought to find out the quantities of work produced by faculty as a result of using the Internet. Figure 1 above, shows that out of the 50(100%) lecturers, only 23 research articles and 4 books had been published among them. Fifteen papers had been produced for presentation at international conferences. Five lecturers were using the Internet for scholarship as they were studying for higher degrees. This goes to show that there is still need to consult the Internet for the production of more work. A paltry 23 researches is nothing to brag about among 50 faculty members, more so over a period of three years.

**Table 2. The challenges confronting the lecturers in the use of the Internet (N=50)**

Challenge	Response			
	Yes		No	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
Lack of competence in internet usage	23	44	27	56
Lack of access to blocked but vital documents	38	76	12	24
Incapacity to subscribe to vital e-libraries	45	90	5	10
Inability to subscribe even to free e-resources	46	92	4	8
Lack of knowledge on Internet data retrieving especially documents in PDF format	37	84	13	26
Inexperience in the use of the computer	11	22	39	88
Electricity blackouts	48	96	2	4
Poor connectivity	38	76	12	24

Table 2 shows that lack of competence in internet usage accounted for 23(44%) of the respondents. Thirty-eight (76%) stated that lack of access to blocked but vital documents made it difficult for them to use the internet. The majority of 45(90%) felt incapacitated to subscribe to vital e-libraries whereas on 5(10%) could subscribe. Another 46(92%) were unable to subscribe to free e-resources but 4(8%) could. This vast majority described the subscription to e-journals as expensive.

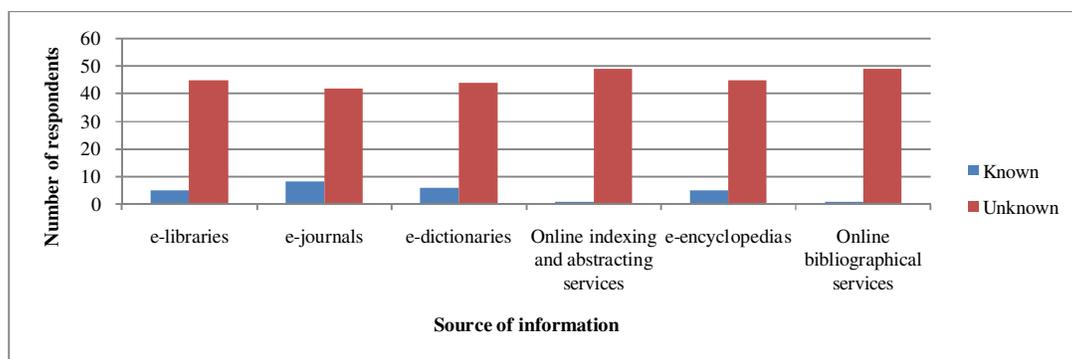


Figure 2. Sources of information that are known to the lecturers

Lack of knowledge on Internet data retrieving especially documents on PDF format was found to be the problem for the majority of faculty members. This accounted for 37(84%) of

the lecturers while only 13(26%) had no problem. This points out to the need to provide training for faculty members for searching online information in whatever format or version. Inexperience in the use of the computer was a challenge for a minority of 11(22%) while the majority of 39(88%) had experience in the use of the computer. The challenge of electricity blackouts was prevalent accounting for 48(96%). Thirty-eight (76%) decried the poor Internet connectivity whereas this was not a challenge for a minority of 12(24%).

The data in Figure 2 above shows that a very negligible percent of the faculty members have gone online to find information from the e-libraries 5(10%), e-journals 8(16%), e-dictionaries 6(12%), e-encyclopedias 5(10%), online indexing and abstracting services 1(2%) and online bibliographical services 1(2%). The use of the e-facilities was found to be low mainly due to inadequacy Internet competence among the majority of the lecturers.

The lecturers were asked to offer suggestions on how best could move towards the use of the Internet as an important facility for their day to day use. Table 3 below shows that responses obtained from the lecturers.

**Table 3. The strategies meant to overcome the challenges confronting the lecturers (N=50)**

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Freq</i>
Intensive training in ICTs	21
Intensive training in Internet usage	38
Need for training in accessing documents in various versions, for example PDF documents	40
Training in subscriptions to e-resources	45

Table 3 shows that intensive training in ICTs was required by 21(%) whereas intensive training in Internet usage was needed by a majority of 38(%). Need for training in accessing documents in various versions, for example PDF documents Training in subscriptions to e-resources accounted for another overwhelming majority of 40(%) and 45(%) needed training on how to subscribe to e-resources on the Internet.

### MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The following were the major findings of the study:

1. The respondents from all the faculties showed enthusiasm towards use of Internet for various purposes including research and scholarship work.
2. The Internet was used for research for publication purposes by a sizeable number of the lecturers but the majority of the lecturers used the Internet for research for scholarship work as they were working towards their PHDs and Masters degrees.
3. Other uses of the Internet by lecturers, though not popular, included communication through e-mail and other platforms, recreation in the form of games and shopping.
4. Though respondents showed a positive attitude towards the use of the Internet, the impact of this use was not being translated into tangible results as only 23 research articles and 4 books had been published among the 50 lecturers over a period of three years.

5. Lack of competence in internet usage and lack of access to blocked but vital documents made it difficult for the faculty members to use the internet.
6. The majority of faculty members felt incapacitated to subscribe to vital e-libraries while some were unable to subscribe to free e-resources
7. Lack of knowledge on Internet data retrieving especially documents on PDF format was found to be the problem for the majority of faculty members.
8. A minority was inexperienced in the use of the computer and the majority decried the poor Internet connectivity as a hindrance to the use of the internet.
9. A very negligible percent of the faculty members have gone online to find information from the e-libraries, e-journals, e-dictionaries, e-encyclopedias, online indexing and abstracting services and online bibliographical services.
10. The use of the e-facilities was found to be low mainly due to inadequacy Internet competence among the majority of the lecturers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From the conclusions above, it is therefore recommended that:

1. There should be intensive training in ICTs particularly the use of the computer in the production of document.
2. There is need for intensive training in Internet usage particularly searching for information from various sources.
3. There is also need for training in accessing documents in various versions, for example PDF documents
4. Training is also required on how to subscribe to e-resources
5. There is need to pool resources together and subscribe as teams to these e-resources that are found to be unaffordable for individuals. The parent institution can also be asked to subscribe for the faculty.
6. Though expensive, lecturers are encouraged to purchase USB internet modems for connectivity where the institution is unable to provide connectivity.

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