

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AND LEARNERS' SUPPORT SERVICES: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The paper revealed that the higher education has been revolutionized by open and distance learning system. An important role was played by libraries for student support package in DE. The application of information and communication technology in education had brought a tremendous improvement to learning, research and study. ICT was used by many libraries as their main methods of delivering information services and resources via online chat rooms, e-mail services, teleconferencing and toll-free numbers, etc. Recommendation was basically on the need for the libraries to create adequate awareness on the need for students to embrace the use of ICT.

Keywords: *Distance Education, Distance Librarianship, Information Communication Technology, Library service, Reference service.*

Introduction:

Distance education has gained popularity all over the world as a means of extending continuing education to all people, particularly professionals. Distance education system can be described as a system of education characterized by physical separation between the teacher and the learner. The instruction is delivered through a variety of media which include print and other ICT resources to learner who have missed the opportunity of attending formal school. It is in support of this that Jegede (2003) described distance education as a mode other than the conventional face to face method whose goals are similar to and just as noble and practical as those on campus full time programme.

It is an accepted fact that the conventional system of higher education cannot cope with the enormous demand for higher education in the country. Since Independence in 1947, student population has increased about 29 times and it continues to swell. It was felt in the 80s that the traditional pattern education was quite expansive and unable to cater to the needs of

a large section of society.

Open and Distance learning:

Today two terms that are being used almost inter-changeably are 'Open Learning' and 'Distance Education' and they are often combined to be known as Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Open learning is a philosophy and Distance Education is the mode used for translating it into reality as the two are complementary to each other.

Distance Education (DE) is an umbrella term which describes all the teaching learning arrangements in which the learner and the teacher are separated by space and time. In fact it is a mode of delivering education and instruction to learners who are not physically present in a traditional setting of a classroom.

India has one of the largest DE systems in the world, second only to China. There are six types of institutions offering DE today:

1. National Open University
2. State Open Universities
3. Distance Education Institutions (DEIs)
at-
 - a. Institutions of National Importance

- b. Central Universities
 - c. State Universities
 - d. Deemed to be Universities
 - e. State Private Universities
4. DEIs at Stand-alone Institutions
- a. Professional Associations
 - b. Government Institutions
 - c. Private institutions

The major objectives of DE system are:

1. To democratize higher education to large segments of the population, in particular the disadvantaged groups such as those living in remote and rural areas, working people, women etc.
2. To provide an innovative system of university-level education which is both flexible and open in terms of methods and pace of learning; combination of courses, eligibility for enrollment, age of entry, conduct of examination and implementation of the programmes of study;
3. To provide an opportunity for up-gradation of skills and qualifications; and
4. To develop education as a lifelong activity to enable persons to update their knowledge or acquire knowledge in new areas.

Distance Education & Distance Librarianship:

Libraries and librarians are as important to distance learning as they are to face-to-face education. Librarians need to understand the mechanics and concepts of DE to provide effective distance library service. In DE, learning takes place at the location of the student and not at the institution of instruction. Traditionally, distance learners were rural-based, middle aged and female.

Today's distance learner is located anywhere, of any age and gender. Traditional approaches to education and library services have proved to be less than successful in various countries without regular contacts with lecturers; distance learners are much more dependent on learning resources. The challenge for the library and information profession as well as for university educators is significant.

Library Support for Distance Education in the ICT Environment:

For years some libraries have provided library services to faculty and students involved in distance education, an environment where students were not physically on the originating campus of the courses. This has included courses delivered by correspondence, television and instructors who traveled to other geographical locations. Since academic libraries have a long history of collaborating with faculty and students, with telecommunication and computing units and with other libraries, it is expected they will seek opportunities for enhanced collaboration and services in distance learning arena. While some provisions for access to library holdings have been made, there is a need to address the situation from a system wide perspective. In doing so it must be recognized that the provision of library and information services to distant learners cannot be treated as an after thought or managerial cost item when planning for these programs.

The Inter-institutional Library Council (ILC), in order to assure that students enroll in distance education courses and programs have access to library and information resources, is submitting a set of

recommendations. These recommendations were developed and endorsed by the council based on a study and discussion of the issues. In making these recommendations the council wishes to stress the need to –

1. Assure the involvement of libraries in the initial phases of the distance education developmental process, and
2. Provide adequate budgetary support for the staff, materials, technology and access needed to provide library services to distance learners.

The rapid spread of ICT, recent reductions in technology costs and connection services due to economies of scale, and a rise in personal ownership of ICTs are making ICT use for DL seem more attractive. Many libraries in developed countries already use ICT as their main method of delivering information services and resources, through online chat rooms, e-mail services, fee-based or free online databases and reference services, teleconferencing and toll-free numbers.

ICT may be used effectively for DL if:

- a. The institution is committed to providing a high level of library services to distance learners
- b. The initial and ongoing cost of hardware, software and connectivity charges are within the institution's financial means
- c. End users (students and faculty) have access to the ICT at their location.

As libraries continue to make networked services available to patrons, they will be able to better serve their students at remote locations. The advances that libraries have made in providing access to diverse group of resources and to a widening constituency

group speaks of the potential services that can be offered to remote users.

Role of Librarians in Distance Education:

Librarian's today stand at an interesting threshold with immense possibilities. They have a critical and vital role to play in providing library services to distance learners and ensuring that they receive the same quality of education as on campus students. To fulfill their responsibilities in the distance learning environment, DE librarians are expected to possess a wide ranging arsenal of skills. Traditional skills such as reference, collection development and library instructions, must be supplemented with in depth knowledge of the internet and World Wide Web; knowledge of technology and the web page design; marketing and legal issues related to copyright, fair use and electronic licensing. Added to these, they need soft skills such as flexibility, time management, ability to negotiate, work collaboratively and communicate with a diverse clientele.

As more and more college and university libraries respond to the challenges of distance education, the roles and responsibilities of academic librarians are shifting. Many academic libraries are creating web-accessible virtual or electronic libraries. Most virtual libraries have online public access catalog (OPAC) to make students aware of their journal and book collections, remote access to electronic databases with citations, abstracts or full text of journal articles, books, encyclopedias, and reference works, inter-library loan and document delivery services, remote reference assistance via chat, e-mail, or telephone and web tutorials for library instructions. Academic librarians are also increasingly creating positions for

distance education librarians to cater to the specific needs of the distance learners. DE librarians serve as liaisons to three different constituents – distance learners, faculty who teach distance courses and programs and departments that provide support to those courses. Matson and Bonski outline three roles of a librarian in the digital age: 1. Proactive enhanced service provider; 2. Guru of copyright, or of licensing and electronic redistribution; and 3. System interface designer.

Librarians supporting distance learners encounter challenges and issues that are different from those faced by librarians working solely with on campus users. Even though the core services DE and other academic librarians provide in distance learning environment are the same, the services are provided in different ways, thereby altering the role and responsibilities of librarians.

The following sections will focus on challenges and opportunities encountered by librarians serving distance learners with respect to:

1. Reference and referral service
2. Access to library collections and information resources
3. Electronic reserves and copyright law
4. Reciprocal borrowing and resource sharing agreements
5. Inter-library loans and document delivery
6. Bibliographic instructions and information literacy
7. Faculty awareness and course support
8. Marketing and public relations

Issues in Providing Distance Library Service:

The most important DL service considerations are:

- Timeliness of service
- Maintaining a high level and quality of access to DL materials
- Where possible, personal contact with students and faculty.

Distance, time-differences and inadequate communications often make it harder in DL to satisfy an information query or service, as ongoing client contact over a longer period is often necessary before the need is satisfied.

A. Access to materials & document delivery:

In addition to distance and time-difference barriers, national censorship and religious beliefs in receiving countries affect document and information delivery. In some countries, all e-mail and internet sites are monitored before individuals can access or download them, or access may be blocked altogether. DL services must be sensitive to these realities and establish non-electronic ways to field enquiries and to deliver services. For example, mail, fax or phone can be used for enquiries. Print copies or audio and video tapes of materials can be sent through regular mail or by courier. Borrowing and service arrangements can also be made with libraries in other locations. A pilot assessment period with student feedback can help determine if the proposed service is accessible to them, and appropriate to their needs.

B. Consultation service:

Consultation can be conducted through e-mail, toll-free telephone services, pre-packaged mail-out information or scheduled remote site visits. Institutions that have a toll-free telephone service should if possible also use it for library

consultation. The frequency and duration of remote library site visits depend on the institution's DL budget, as well as how far the sites are from the parent institution.

C. Reference service:

In the DE environment, students can use forms to make research queries, either in print or electronically. In the form, "trigger" or "prompt" questions replace face-to-face assistance in helping the student to properly complete a request. Institutions that already have dedicated library telephone services can use them for DL reference inquiries. Some institutions with Web-based services purchase online versions of major reference works to provide students with a convenient access point, such as Athabasca University's Digital Reference Centre.

D. Bibliographic searches:

In some cases, and where enough staff is available, librarians execute full searches for distance learners. Another way is to provide a student manual on conducting bibliographic searches which explains search methods, such as moving from general to specific questions, and lists basic texts, journals and reference sources in various disciplines. More detailed "help" manuals can also be developed on a discipline-by-discipline basis.

E. Bibliographic Instruction & information literacy instruction:

Librarians must help learners access, evaluate and use information effectively and efficiently. For delivering BI and IL instruction at a distance, librarians take on a more active teaching, rather than facilitative role. Centrae Meeting (www.centranow.com) is an electronic communication utility that has been used successfully to deliver BI at a distance. Deakin University, Australia's

Smart Searcher Tutorial service uses interactive, web-based IL tutorial software from UNILINC Ltd. Alternative BI and IL delivery methods include radio, computer and video conferencing etc.

Library Needs/Requirements:

In a situation where a distance learner is seen to be autonomous and independent (Sauve 1993), and that separation of teacher and learner is seen as a central characteristic of distance education, libraries play a significant role in supporting the process by, amongst other things, selecting relevant and useful reading materials; organizing them in some order so that the students can find materials they need without wasting time; and making learning materials readily available for consultation or borrowing. It is maintained that libraries are a key resource for many open learners as they provide "access to an enormous range of information most of this will take the form of print on paper – that is, books, pamphlets, journals. But the development of information technology has also made it possible nowadays for libraries to acquire, organize, store, and disseminate information technology related learning materials.

Conclusion:

Distance learning institutions are aware of the need to have well-resourced libraries. They realise the importance of libraries, and that is why they advise their students to use public library resources. Distance learners too are aware of the need to use public libraries for their studies. The survey of students found that almost every student appreciated their significance, and urged them to stock materials relevant to their needs. But being aware of the usefulness of a public library is one thing, and heavy and intensive use another. The experience has

shown that not many students use the libraries.

In general there are barriers from Learners and Libraries point of view.

From libraries there are

a. *Inadequacy of Reading Materials*

b. *Inadequate reading space*

c. *Adequacy and quality of staffing*

From Learners point of view there are hidden and unhidden barriers

1. *Lack of expertise with technology and the new medium*
2. *Cost of communication*
3. *Language deficiencies*
4. *Web site access*
5. *Resistance to new technology*
6. *Fear from technology*
7. *Belief in traditional education*
8. *Feeling of isolation*
9. *Bad design and shape of the conveying medium*
10. *Lack of direct feedback*
11. *No pressure to respond*

Librarians need continuing education to keep current with developments in DE and DL. While there are no formal DL courses, many stand-alone conferences, seminars and workshops have a DL component. Distance librarians should attend DE conferences as well as library conferences, to network with distance educators, keep up to date on trends, development and issues in DE, and to sensitize distance educators to the benefits of DE library support services. There is also professional literature on DL, and online librarianship and DE-oriented sites.

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