

Library Services in Distance Education System: In Indian Context

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Abstract

This paper will examine the issues related to role of Libraries, Library professionals in distance education system. The exceptional expansion of distance-learning programs at colleges and universities have remarkable implications for providing library services to distance students. This article reviews the literature and presents an overview of distance-learning services offered by academic libraries. The focus is on examining additional responsibilities, opportunities, and challenges encountered by academic librarians in serving distance learners. Also detailed are a number of new paradigms that distance librarianship has introduced into the profession of librarianship.

Introduction

The world wide expansion of distance learning is one of the most powerful and significant trends in modern education. While it has long been recognized as an effective mechanism to reach students who are geographically remote from colleges and universities, only in the last twenty years technology has provided the impetus not only to reach huge numbers of students, but also to in some degree ameliorate the disadvantages of lack of face to face contact with the instructor. Distance education is most often defined currently as having four basic attributes: (a) teachers and learners are separated during more than half of the instructional process (b) an educational organization influences the process, including some form of student evaluation (c) educational media are used to unite teacher and learner and to carry course content; and (d) two way communication is provided between teacher, tutor, or educational agency and learner.

Over the last 10 years, an expansion of distance education has been driven by social and economic imperatives. Equity of access to learning for those unable or unwilling to participate as full time or part time campus based students is increasingly

recognised as important in serving the needs of not only rural or dispersed communities but also other disadvantaged groups in society. Distance education has been further stimulated by efforts to promote lifelong learning to ensure that the workforce has the skills required in a modern and changing economy, and to provide intellectual opportunities for an aging population. These factors have resulted in numerous initiatives, and some major distance teaching programmes have been initiated by conventional universities and new commercial competitors, using satellite television or the Internet. Similar international developments have been encouraged by agencies such as the Commonwealth of Learning¹ and the World Bank². Distance education has thus become a feature of the work of an increasing number of further and higher education institutions.

Growth of Distance Education in India

Distance Education for higher education in India was initiated in the form of Correspondence Courses in 1962, in response to the ever-increasing demand for higher education which could not be met by the conventional system. The Delhi University established a School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education in 1962. Encouraged by the success, the Education Commission (1964-66) recommended the expansion of correspondence education for various purposes. Consequently, the University Grants Commission (UGC) formulated guidelines for introducing correspondence courses in Indian Universities. Three more Institutes of Correspondence Studies were established in the late sixties. Twenty one more universities introduced correspondence programs during the seventies. In the early eighties seven more universities started institutes of correspondences studies. At present there are 45 universities including four deemed universities offering correspondence programs in the country.

The establishment of the open university in the United Kingdom, in 1969 encouraged several countries to deliberate on the new concept and its potential in making higher education more accessible, flexible and innovative. India was one of those countries which examined the possibility of establishing an open university in the early seventies. This influenced a few universities like University of Mysore and Andhra University to adopt open admission policies in the mid seventies by relaxing formal qualifications for entry to undergraduate and post-graduate courses. This seemingly minor innovation provided impetus to efforts towards greater access to higher education for larger segments of the population especially those adults who could not complete school education.

Andhra Pradesh government gave a lead to the country by setting up the Andhra Pradesh Open University (now renamed as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University) at Hyderabad in 1982. In 1985, the Govt. of India, through an Act of Parliament established the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) which is responsible for determining and maintaining standards of distance education and bringing about coordination among all distance education institutes including the open universities all over the country in addition to functioning as University for open learning and distance education programs.

The establishment of IGNOU at New Delhi in 1985 has proved to be a significant milestone in the development of distance education in India. It provides a central Organization for guiding and coordinating the activities of all distance education institutes and state open universities in the country. It has popularized the concept of open learning system resulting in the establishment of three more state open universities in the late eighties viz. - Kota Open University in Kota (Rajasthan), Yashwant Rao Chavan Maharashtra Open University at Nasik (Maharashtra) and Nalanda Open University at Patna (Bihar). States of Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka have also established Open Universities recently.

“From just a handful of students in 1962-63 the enrolment in correspondence courses rose to about 65, 000 students in 1975-76. During the last fifteen years the annual growth rate of enrolment in open universities and the institutes of correspondence studies attached to conventional universities has been appreciably higher than in the conventional universities and in 1990-91 it was approximately 600, 000. The proportion of students enrolled in distance education has steadily increased from 2.6% of the enrolment in higher education in 1975-76 to 11.5% in 1990-91. During 1992-93 the enrolment for distance education programs was over eight lakhs”³.

Library provision and distance education

Much has been said and written about the promises of distance education. It is clear that, for it to succeed, students’ access to and effective use of information resources to support their learning is essential.

Supporting their own institution’s distance learners has become a core activity for a growing number of academic libraries. In addition many national and local governments are expecting the public library network to engage more effectively in fulfilling its role as a provider of support for lifelong learning. It is important, therefore, that libraries review the response that they are making to meet the needs of learners who may be restricted or no means of gaining access to print-based collections.

In traditional distance education, basic efforts were made by the teaching institutions to ensure that collections of core texts and journals were accessible to registered students through, for example, postal loan services. Otherwise the student was dependent on buying textbooks (sometimes without an effective bookseller or postal service to assist them to acquire books from national or international sources), or using any relevant materials or services provided by a local public or academic library. However, the world we live in has changed significantly.

“A key enabling factor is new Information and Communication Technologies. Increasingly distance education is utilising e-mail and web-based facilities to deliver teaching materials and provide interactive tutorial support across the Internet in both the industrialised and developing world”⁴. Similarly, to meet the needs of distance learners, library services now include not only a traditional postal loan service, but also off-campus access to Internet databases, and online access to the full-text of electronic journals or specially digitised book chapters. However, such technologies

can only be applied effectively if there is a clearly developed rationale and well-defined strategy which addresses the issues that libraries must engage with in order to best serve the needs of distance learners.

Literature Review

Literature survey was conducted to ascertain information about distance education and role of library in it in India. A highlight of some of the results is given below.

Mathew, Pastula. (2010) quotes in his article (p.77), “Information and communication Technology (ICT) has become an integral tool in enhancing library services world wide”⁵. This article looks at ways technology is utilized a Massey University to bridge the gap between distance students and traditional library services. There are a variety of software provides, formats and implementation practices available when considering educational technology.

Nickel, Lisa T; Rachel Mulvihill, G. (2010) discussed the strategy (p.87-95) for providing reference to the distance library students by gathering information on what services they are offered via their home institutions and helping them navigate the often confusing landscape of library resources and services. Authors outline the colleges and opportunities for public libraries presented by distance learners and suggest some services that might be provided for them. They discussed the opportunities for outreach to distance learning students from both public and academic libraries⁶.

Kant, Ravi wrote in his article “E-learning program in India”⁷.

- University Grant Commission higher education project – UGC with collaboration of INSAT, Started COUNTRY WIDE CLASS ROOM on 15th August 1984, to upgrade and enrich the quality of education, while extending their reach. In inter University Consortium for education for education communication (CEC) along with a chain of about 20 audio-visual media. Mass Communication research centre was setup by UGC at different institute of the Countries.
- IGNOU Doordarshan Telecast – Indira Gandhi National Open University started telecasting educational program from 1991, for distance learning.
- GYANDARSHAN Educational Channel – Ministry of Human Resources Development, information and Broadcasting Prasar Bharti and IGNOU launched GYANDARSHAN jointly on 26th January 2000. It is a exclusive educational TV Channel in India. Using jointly with SIET, NOS, DST NCST etc. and at present it transmits educational program round the clock. The program of IGNOU, CIET-NCERT are telecast for 4 hrs each, IIT program for 3 hrs, each, CEC-UGC program for two and half hrs and one hr each for IIT and adult education.
- EDUSET provides education to millions of people at their doorstep. It is the world’s first educational satellite in India, launched in 20th September 2004, It enables information to be broadcast in local languages and devoted to long distance learning in India.

Gill, S S and Dabas K C (1998) writes in their article (p.348-351) that digital libraries in distance learning are still not clear in country like India, The INFLIBNET has already started NET-WORKING of different university libraries; on its completion it will be possible to share all available resources for imparting E-learning to for distance places in the country⁸.

Batt, C speaking in 2010, says that in order to step up to the mark in digital are there needs to be a fundamental shift in how libraries are trained and how they perceive their role⁹. Information professional need to be committed to changing the relationship between information and the people who use it.

Morgan (1999) wrote (p.33) "few, if any, people successfully predict the future with 100 percent accuracy but there are experts who have wider perspectives than the rest of us and consequently, are more apt to see what is ahead. Libraries of the future will always be keeping one ear to the experts and are more tuned to their individual experiences"¹⁰.

Vatnal, R.M., Prakash, K and Mathapati, G.C.(2004) wrote in their article "Library and information service for distance education is often extension of institution's existing traditional library services. When establishing the library services for e-learning, traditional Library standards and procedures can be applied as a guide. Library services in the e-learning environment to provide most intended to provide traditional library services such as consultation, reference and bibliographical searches and course reading material. Generally in providing postgraduate and research level library services it is most challenging as the learner needs cannot be satisfied just with repackaged reading and information"¹¹.

As N. Jagannathan argues: "...a large segment of the population is pursuing its studies through distance education systems. Their needs for library and information services, can neither be disputed nor denied". Obviously library services are important for distance learners if they are to succeed in their studies, but library services are also important to the university offering the courses. Holly Heller-Ross argues that there are a number of reasons for library support to distance learners. These include "... curriculum requirements, student and faculty research needs, library standards for equity of student support, accreditation criteria, and the importance of information literacy"¹².

Heller-Ross also points out that the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has written guidelines for the provision of library services to distance learners. These guidelines state "The Parent Institution should provide library service to the extended campus community equitable with that provided to the on-campus community"¹³.

Adupa, Sunil and Vijaya, Dr.Kumar A. (2007) explained "Recent increase in the availability and number of distance education courses offered does have a rationale. Modern technology-notably the Internet - provides opportunities for really high-quality distance education. Digital libraries are one of those opportunities. The Digital Libraries have become a gateway to technical information and a major support element for distance education and the development of digital collections have become an integral part of the teaching learning process. In this present theoretical paper a modest attempt has been made by the authors to examine the role of digital libraries in distance education"¹⁴.

Factors that lead to distance librarianship

- a. Generally the distance education student is older and more experienced than his residential counterpart. But, distance learners may have been disadvantaged in regards to prior schooling and many not have had exposure to libraries in any substantial way because of this lack of library experience.
- b. Generally majority of the distance learner students are working, hence they may or may not visit a library in person.
- c. Success of the distance learner is so dependent on course materials, library service to this group is crucial. Students do not have classroom lectures, seminar discussions or the informal learning experiences of the traditional student.
- d. Distance learners are external to the main stream of tertiary level education systems. As a result of this separation the information needs of these learners are neglected;
- e. The view that distance educators can provide - through "packaged" distance teaching materials - all the information needed by such learners;
- f. The lack of formal links between the providers of Distance Education and the information providers in the teaching institutions;
- g. The invisible nature of this corps of students facilitates a disregard of their existence by both Distance Education administrators and information providers.
- h. Even though students enrolled in Distance Education programs receive the same degree as on-campus students, participants and observers are concerned about the quality of the education received. Critics of Distance Education programs cite instances where students are left to fend for themselves in gaining access to the information and resources needed to complete the assignments. The concern is that students are being spoon-fed and are not rigorously challenged. These concerns are raised most frequently by observers and participants who feel that library usage and academic research are an integral component of the educational process. They are concerned that distance learners who are denied the opportunity of exploring the full range of library resources available to their on-campus counterparts, may not become information literate in the process, so that, while they receive the same degree, they may not have received the same quality of education.

The need for adequate, well-developed and accessible library and information services to inter-mural tertiary level students is an entrenched principle. Further, one of the important measures of quality education at the tertiary level is the scope of library and information services available to support such programs.

Significance

The potential of Distance Education is immense and the ability to provide library and information services at a distance poses both a challenge and opportunity. It is hoped that this article will contribute in some ways to the heightening of sensitivity to the

issues and problems inherent in the delivery of Distance Education Library and Information Services to support Distance Education programs; and to explore how the information technology (IT) can play a significant role for more effective access to information, delivery of information and communication. The study is very important for the development of library services for Distance Education planning. We need to identify the problems and characteristics of current library services for Distance Education. Assessing the future demands and developing guidelines and recommendations to meet those needs, would be very helpful to Distance Education planners, educators and other decision-makers in both the private and government sectors. This information should also help in developing alternatives to deal with problem areas and initiate workable projects relevant to Distance Education Library and Information Services development strategies.

In addition, the study will produce baseline data for information pertaining to Distance Education which will be very helpful for future studies in this area.

Projected Role of Library in Distance Education System Services recommended for Distance Learners by a Library

General Information

- Distance Learning Guide

Services

- Interlibrary Loan
- Ask-a-Librarian
- Subject Specialists
- Course Reserves

Tools

- Lib Guides Subject Guides
- Libraries' Catalogue
- Databases
- E-Journal Search
- E-Book Collections
- RefWorks

Technical Help

- Login Problem Report
- Online Course Help
- Help Desk
- Networking and Computer support
- E Learning Student Tutorials

Document Delivery Services

Lending services should be provided to distance learners. Since most of the learners reside in remote areas, lending services can be provided through postal library service. Multiple copies of books, that are on heavy demand can be procured at the Study Centers for lending to the students. To make it workable, postal authorities should be approached for the granting of special concession for to-and-fro mailing charges in respect of distance teaching institutions and their students. In this service, students may be required to bear the postal charges to avail the facility.

Adequate Service Hours

Since most of the distance learners are from the working community, the Study Centre Libraries should be open on all days for extended hours. This will allow the learners to use the library services at their convenience.

Accessibility to Resources of Other Libraries

Most of the Study Centers of Open Universities are housed in educational institutes. These institutes can open their libraries on weekends. Provision can also be made for contact points at some academic institutes for remote students to assist in utilizing the full range of services available to conventional students. This can be done by signing a Memorandum of Understanding with these academic institutes. Students can pay a reasonable fee for using the resources of these libraries.

Reference and Referral Services

Reference assistance should be made available to distance learners. The identified Study Centers can be provided with computer terminals with e-mail facilities and sufficient telephone lines. The students can use these facilities to interact with the libraries of the headquarters and ask for the required information. Furthermore, the librarians should be involved in tele-conferencing sessions to interact with the learners directly to understand and answer their queries in a more efficient way.

Expanded Access to Information Resources

Under this service, the libraries of the Headquarters should design their WebPages including library catalogues, holding of journals etc. The libraries can also subscribe to electronic journals, electronic books, specialized articles, case studies and student's resource materials in electronic version. The access to these resources can be restricted to the identified Study Centers and passwords will be required for distance learners to log in. otherwise distance learner can access the bibliographical detail of contents with abstract of all the e-resource materials along with print journals and magazines from any where. Full text can be provided to them through mail or web link against their request.

Library services to distance learner can also be enhanced by using Telephone, Teleconferencing, OPAC, Online database, E-mail, Voice mail, Internet chat, Audio and visual conferencing, Fax machine.

Furthermore, Libraries of Distance Learning Institutes should explore the prospects for establishing 'electronic- reserves' system. The libraries should investigate the technological, economic and copyright related issues involved in providing electronic access materials to course-specific 'reserve' materials.

Developing Information Literacy Skills

This component fosters the skills and knowledge in users to effectively select, retrieve, use and evaluate information disseminated in traditional formats and on networks. Distance Learning Institutes need to develop a basic library and network instructional curriculum. This instructional curriculum packet should form a part of the main curriculum. Librarians should guide people in the selection of online resources and in helping people to select and use multimedia materials.

Faculty-Library Liaison

Faculty awareness and involvement remain critical factors in the delivery of library services. For many distance learners, the faculty members are the only channel of communication for information about campus services, including those of the library. Thus there is a need to establish Library-Faculty Liaison to communicate with the faculty on overall matters regarding the availability and use of library resources by distance learners. The Liaison can also connect faculty to librarians to develop systematic approaches to involve the library in new course development and course designs. The State University of West Georgia and Minnesota Virtual University provide such services.

Consortium of Distance Learning Libraries

As a long- term project, Open Universities can come together to pool their assets and utilize their resources collectively. The participating libraries can go for digitization of their resources and coordinate their activities on a wide area network. Other electronic resources like CD-ROMs; electronic journals can also be shared among these libraries. IGNOU being a National Open University can take the initiative to form such a consortium. To make the system more flexible, Course Materials of these Universities can also be put on the network. This will promote the idea of a Virtual University.

Conclusion

The inevitable advances of information technology, convergence of communication technology, reduction in costs, competition and globalization will definitely increase

the potential of distance learning. The growing population of distance learners will increasingly expect university and library services to be delivered to their desktops. Therefore, there is a need for academics and librarians to venture into distance learning systems and recognize the special demands and problems of newly emerging group of learners and to make reciprocal arrangements to ensure that these students are not disadvantaged. They need to collaborate and take necessary policy decisions in order to expand the pedagogical boundaries of distance learning, ensuring that electronic developments are integrated with traditional concerns for wide reading, student autonomy and independent thinking. This should form an important agenda for action for the distance educators in the new millennium so as to meet the information needs of distance learners in a cost effective way.

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