Distance Education and Library Support: Indian Perspectives

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Abstract

Distance education holds the key to growth in the future of higher education. It is essential that providers of distance learning courses give more attention to student support services like access to libraries and information. Technological advances, Internet and improvement of web technologies have allowed higher education institutions to expand their student base through distance education. The paper points out that IT services can be utilized for extending library and information services to the distance learners. A total re-engineering of the library and information services is highlighted. While focusing on the costs and recent trends in this kind of library service, this article traces the design, implementation, and sustainability of providing support to distance learners at colleges and universities.

Introduction

The conventional system of education cannot accommodate all aspirants of higher education whose numbers are ever increasing. This has resulted in devising alternative methods of education to satisfy the demand. Hence in addition to the conventional methods of instruction conducted in the premises of educational institutions, many colleges and universities have started offering non-formal education programs to the students in off-campus locations. Internationally the mode of providing courses through non-formal methods is having many manifestations, which are described by variety of terms. Some such terms are distance education, distance learning, off-campus education, open learning, flexible learning, extended learning etc. However, a common factor in programs reduce costs, because it enables relatively few faculty members to teach a large number of students. Correspondence education also appeals to students who, for any number of reasons, cannot attend classes on campus Distance Education is gaining lot of prominence in the country due to various socio-economic parameters and the rising demand for education. Distance learning Libraries should concentrate on fulfilling the information needs and requirements of distance learners

by exploring modern information technologies, developing library networks and negotiating with information providers to strike better learner friendly licensing and access models.. A proactive role and re-engineering of library and information services are required, as the learner is not only separated from the institution but also from the library of that institution. The concept of library services for distance learners is very little discussed in India and the authority's concerned claim that the learning materials supplied to students are exhaustive enough to complete their studies. Library services for distance learners, focusing on effective service methods and financial considerations. Online reference and instructional services, interlibrary loan/ document delivery (ILL/DD), and open source software (OSS) solutions are at the core of this paper. The growth of distance learning has highlighted the need to pay attention to the fundamentals of librarianship. a re-examination of critical functions of a library such as collecting, organizing, preserving and ultimately making knowledge available all come under scrutiny when applied to the distance learning context.

Growth of distance education in India

Understanding the imperative role education plays in the overall national development, a number of Education Commissions and Committees were set up from time to time to look into the problems of education and to suggest solutions. On the suggestion of Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), the Government of India constituted an Expert Committee in 1961 headed by Dr. D.S. Kothari, to look into the suitability of Correspondence Courses for expanding educational opportunities. The Committee recommended introduction of Correspondence Courses to expand and equalize the educational opportunities. Thus, ODL (Open Distance Learning) in India was introduced by Delhi University in 1962 through the School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education to enable those, who had the inclination an d aptitude to acquire further knowledge and improve their professional competence. Subsequently in 1968, Correspondence Courses were started by Punjabi University and University of Rajasthan. Meerut and Mysore University started these courses in 1969. Slowly many Universities followed suit. Rapid expansion of the ODL courses took place during the seventies when 19 more universities started Institutions/Directorates of Correspondence Courses. In the eighties, the distance education system expanded further. Not only did more and more universities started opening correspondence education Directorates, but the beginning of establishing single mode Open Universities also began in this decade. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad was established in 1982 by the State of Andhra Pradesh. It was followed by the setting up of Indira Gandhi National Open University by the Government of India in 1985 by an Act of the Parliament. The establishment of IGNOU is considered to be a landmark development in the field of distance education in the country. The growth of distance education has been exponential over the last four decades, beginning in 1962, in our country. As on 01.03.2010 in addition to IGNOU, 13 SOUs(State Open University) and about 200 Distance Education Institutions are offering programs in diverse disciplines. The jurisdiction of State Open Universities offering distance mode programs is limited to the respective States

as provided in their Acts. Statistics relating to 2009 -10 has been taken from the unpublished records of DEC..

(Source: DEC Database, 2007)[1], (Source: UGC Annual Report 2008-09)[2]

Present Scenario of ODL in India

The Open Distance Learning (ODL) system, also known as Distance Education (DE) system, has evolved as one of the effective modes of education and training.
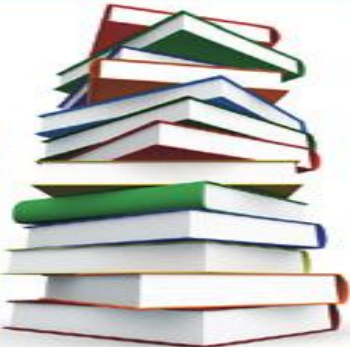
Following Data tells the true story of DE growth in our country.

- "Overall annual growth in enrollment between 1975-76 and 2008-09 was 5.6% for the conventional system, while it was 16.3% in the ODL system."
- "The share of distance education increased from 2.6% in 1975-76 to 8.9% in 1985-86 and further improved to 10.7% in 1990-91 and to 20.56% in 2008- 09."
- "Conventional system stands at 136.42 lakh and there are another 36 lakh learners in ODL system. ODL constitutes about 22% of the total enrollment in the conventional system."
- "Enrollment in technical and professional courses in the ODL system is less than 10%. In DEIs, it is in the range of 6-10 % and in state open niversities (SOUs) it is in the range of 10-15 %."
- "The percentage of students enrolled for post-graduate general programme in conventional system is 10.92 %, while the same in the ODL system is in the range 15-20% in SOUs and around 30% in DEIs."
- "Out of the total research students (0.83 lakh), 86% are in the universities. There were 954 PhD students in open universities prior to UGC notification not allowing research programme through distance mode."

(Report by seven members committee headed by Prof. N R Madhava Menon, 2012) [3]

- "At present, close to 24% of all enrollments are in the ODL system and growing fast because of the reach of this mode and the opportunities it gives to those who are already employed and seek to enhance their qualifications, "(Prof V N Rajasekharan Pillai, former vice chancellor of IGNOU and member of the committee told FE)
- "Contribution of ODL to gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education has risen to about 22%."(FE, May 04, 2012)

REACHING OUT

Year	Distance teaching institutions	Student enrollment
1962	1	1,112
1970-71	17	29,500
1980-81	34	1.6 lakh
1985-86	40	3.5 lakh
1990-91	51	5.9 lakh
1995-96	57	10.3 lakh
2000-01	79	13.7 lakh
2005-06	117	18.3 lakh
2009-10	200	36.6 lakh

(Published by FE, New Delhi, May 04 2012) [4]
Numbers favor distance education despite the general mind block against it.

Library Services for Distance Learners

The aforesaid statistics state that in future distance education system is going to play a very important role in our country. Hence to make this education system worth in our society, it is important that quality of the distance education system should be upgraded. In this mission Library support service would be an important component. Distance learning library services refers to those library services in support of college, university, or other post-secondary courses and programs offered away from a main campus, or in the absence of a traditional campus. These courses may be taught in traditional or nontraditional formats or media, may or may not require physical facilities, and may or may not involve live interaction of teachers and students. The phrase is inclusive of courses in all post-secondary programs designated as: extension, extended, off-campus, extended campus, distance, distributed, open, flexible, franchising or virtual. According to the Association of College& research libraries' guidelines, "members of the distance learning community are entitled to library services and resources equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus settings."(ALA, 2004)[5].The guidelines very clearly state that the traditional on campus library services themselves cannot be stretched to meet the library needs of distance learning students and faculty who face distinct and different challenges involving library access and information delivery. Special funding arrangements, proactive planning and promotion are necessary to deliver equivalent library services and to achieve equivalent results in teaching and learning and generally to maintain quality in distance learning programs. Similarly ILA 'Guidelines for Library Services to Distance Learners'[6] argues that traditional library services designed for on-campus users will not meet the requirements of distance learners.

1.1 New Roles in Academic Librarianship

Yet, evidence recommends that the present demands of academic and research libraries require additional training and education beyond the MLS/MLIS degree. Specially to give quality Library support to distance learners it is very essential that a librarian should take extra training in IT. James L. Mullins (2012)[7] surveyed deans

and directors of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) on how recent MLS graduates fared in meeting the current demands of academic libraries. While his survey does not directly address the emerging roles in which librarians would be supporting distance learners, Mullins substantiates a growing concern among library administrators regarding costs related to the additional training and education of librarians to meet the real-world needs of academic and research libraries.

Allyson Washburn (2006)[8] utilized the OFFCAMP listserv to conduct a survey that investigates the career paths of librarians. Among her findings was that "less than a third of the respondents indicated that they had any education or training. " Her article elaborates further by succinctly outlining job duties of librarians:

- Learning, using, and troubleshooting technology problems
- Marketing services to both distance education students and faculty
- Providing instruction in the use of library resources
- Understanding and complying with copyright

It is helpful that this list reads like a job posting because this is the way we understand new roles in libraries in the changing environment of higher education.

In terms of qualifications, technology and outreach skills were considered the most essential, while the most common challenges facing librarians in this position include lack of adequate budgets and lack of institutional awareness of equitable service for distance learning populations.

1.2 Reference and Instructional Services

A major challenge for academic librarians in providing reference and instructional services to distance education students is to reduce the experiential incongruence between on-campus students and distance learners as much as possible. According to the Association of College and Research Libraries, distance librarians ensure that students enrolled in distance education programs are "provided effective and appropriate library services and resources, which may differ from, but must beequivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus setting" [9] The common types of services offered to distance education students are almost exclusively electronic. In a literature review on improving library services to distance learners, Jennifer Raraigh-Hopper (2010)[10] found that the most common library services offered to distance learners include: "remote access to online library catalog; electronic databases; electronic books and journals; online information literacy tutorials; electronic research guides on academic and special interest topics; electronic general library guides; Ask-A-Librarian (chat, e–mail, or telephone); interlibrary loan; electronic reserves; and document delivery services". In most cases, seven out of these 10 services are the primary duties of reference and instructional librarians. In all of these services, reference and instructional librarians are the sources of help for both distance and on–campus students. In certain cases, academic librarians have been experiencing a growth in demand for reference and instructional services for distance education students. Elaine Sullo et al. (2012)[11] analyze the embedded librarian model for providing library services to distance education students through integration within the course management system.

1.2.1 Electronic Reference

Email can be effectively used for providing reference service. Slade (2000)[12] lists the advantages of email as "Unrestricted temporal and geographic access; reduced cultural and language barriers; receiving a written request from the patron; being able to transmit the results to the patron electronically; saving time by not having to meet the patron in person or contact them by telephone; cost savings in comparison with fax and phone replies; provision of a printed copy of reference transactions to assist with future inquiries; and the option to build a database of questions and answers."

A distance learner may be allowed to approach the library for reference needs through email. The student's information request can be directed to a subject specialist and documents can be forwarded to the student. The process must be carried out cautiously, since the relevance of the document depends on how clear the student's request is, and email does not allow a reference interview.

Reference questions and the answers can be collected and made into a database. They can be indexed and later from this reservoir of reference questions a web page containing "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)" can be created and maintained.

Students have assignments to complete during the course. They can submit the assignments to faculty through email. Usually, corrected assignments are not returned to the students, but now faculty can correct the assignments and provide tips through email.
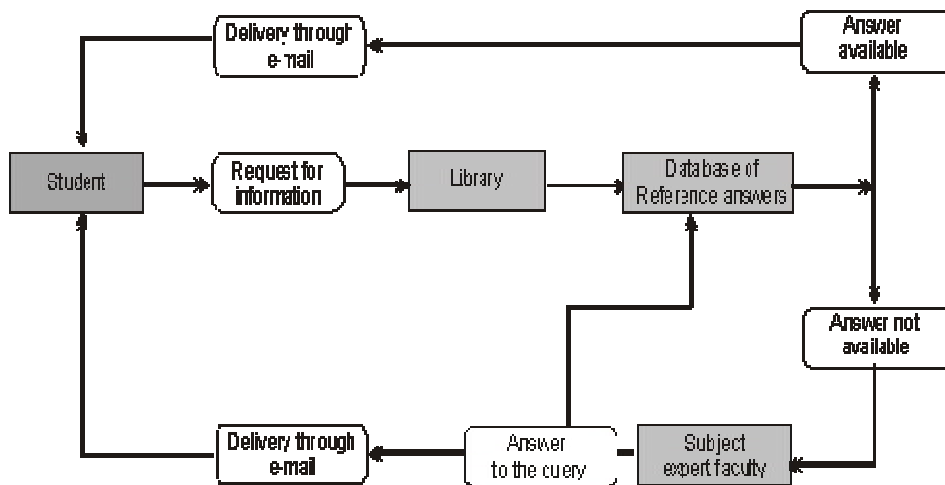

Figure 2 : E-mail Reference Service for Distance learners

Email for distance learners

1.2.2 Online Reference Sources

Major reference sources are now available online. Encyclopedia Britannica (www.eb.com) and Oxford Dictionary (www.oxforddictionary.com) are examples worth mentioning. The library website should also act as a knowledge portal. Links to various websites giving information on specific areas can be accumulated and provided on the website. This will help the student as a single point for browsing.

1.2.3 IGNOU Initiatives for Library Consortium for DE
To provide equitable information access to distance learners at par with the current national initiatives for campus based learners, a library consortium, NODLINET (National Open and Distance Learners' Library Network)[13] for distance learning institutions has been formed as the network of national Open University, state Open Universities and dual mode institutions (directorates of distance education in campus universities) in the country. NODLINET may Reference and Instructional Services. National Open and Distance Learners' Library & Information Network (NODLINET) has been established. Its National Task Force Meeting has delineated the action plan for EFYP (2007-12).

1.3 Library Services through Open Source Software
Open source software model as a means of developing software for the library community has developed considerably in the last few years. Fortunately, much of the software that has been developed for libraries can be used to provide extended library services to distance learning students. Open source software offer solutions to the variability of online library systems, and the variety of service needs that both on-campus and distance education students demand. H. Frank Cervone (2004)[14] of Northwestern University examines OSS as a low-cost option for libraries to provide services for distance learners. OSS packages offer the availability of source code which makes it "possible to inspect the program code to review it and modify it to suit local needs" The ability to modify and incorporate programs with other applications is not available with commercial software This is the basic idea—and major appeal—of OSS.

In some cases, the support costs for open source software may be more than the costs for equivalent commercial software. This is mainly due to the costs of installing and maintaining open source software, which generally requires at least as much, if not more, technological sophistication than that required for commercial software. It would appear that a future in librarianship will not be possible without the education, training, and understanding of current and cutting-edge computing technologies.

1.4 Web-based Library and Information Services
Electronic documents can be made available anywhere and anytime that two computers can connect. What makes this possible is the ubiquitous World Wide Web. With the technology of the web, library documents can be viewed and printed by any person who has a web connected computer, whether that person lives nearby or in another distant location. Furthermore, email makes it easy to contact anybody at any time anywhere in the world in few seconds. The web opens new windows of opportunity to provide information support to distance learners. Neimi, Ehrard, and Neeley (1998)[15] say "What distance learners expect of libraries is the ability to: search periodical indexes, abstracts, CD-ROMs, and bibliographic services such as ERIC; do electronic book check outs and renewals over the telephone (toll free); deliver photocopies, the results of literature searches; internally track and deliver all inter library loan services; and establish an electronic feedback system."

1.5 Library Website as a Service Point

A *website* is a hypermedia document or a collection of hypermedia documents that are linked together under a single subject or institution name. Institute providing distance learning course can contain websites of its library and its faculty, with a home page that is the starting point and which provides the users with key information required to locate resources within the site. Various services can be offered to distance students through the home page of the library.

1.6 OPAC

The Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) is the electronic version of a library's catalogue. A web-based OPAC allows distance learners to browse the catalogue using search options such as author, title, subject, etc. This helps the student to determine the availability of an item in the library. The library can also provide links to the OPACs of other libraries, including those with consortia relationships.

1.7 Access to E-journals

Any journal that is available over the Internet can be called an e-journal. Print equivalents may or may not be available simultaneously. Some electronic journals are freely available. Others have charging mechanisms of different types. There are aggregators of e-journals and they provide access to the full text content for authorized users. Usually they are IP-authenticated, i.e., they are made available only to computers with the specified IP numbers for which subscription is made.

E-journals offer many advantages, including:
- Speed of access to latest information
- Ability to incorporate multimedia elements
- Quick searching
- Linking from and to others (hypertext capability)
- Security (No fear of loss)
- Multi-user capability
- Downloading and printing the articles is very easy

E-journals can be made available to the distance students too. They should be provided with user name and password to assure that only authorized people use the information. The UGC-supported INFLIBNET Center maintains consortia of e-journals, which is available in most of the universities in India. Access to this facility can be given to the students until they graduate.

1.8 E-Reserve

E-reserves are collections of digitized information sources like periodical articles, notes, solved problems, etc., made available on the Internet, and which contain useful information for a specific course and recommended by the instructor. Students can download and print the material. This research analyzes whether the major aggregated databases, EBSCO, Gale, Emerald, Ovid, and ProQuest, can be used easily and successfully for electronic reserves. Academic libraries have created electronic

reserves by scanning articles from the print, saving them as pdf files, and then storing them to a server for retrieval by students during the semester. This process creates logistical, legal, and economic challenges for libraries, which could be alleviated if the aggregators provided a mechanism to create direct links to articles that could be used reliably outside of the original session. This service is very helpful for distance learners and should include previous question papers, complete study materials, and the entire syllabus. A list of recommended readings, recommended websites, etc., are other things that can also be included in e-reserves. If the answers are provided along with the e-reserves, it is very helpful to distance learners.

1.9 Document Delivery and Inter Library Loan
A student can place request for Document Delivery Service after browsing the OPAC. The request can be placed to the nearest study center if it is a printed book. The library on can process the request and send the same through post. The regional study center will issue the book to the student and get it back on the due date. The responsibility of collecting the book back and the charges for document delivery are vested with the regional study centers.

Library Loan can be an additional facility to Distance Learners. Students can be provided those documents also which may not be available wit its Library through Inter Library Loan facility. Details of this facility should be mentioned on institute website.

1.10 Information Literacy
Library services to distant users. The new term, which stands for this concept, is information literacy. Information literacy is a person's skill to identify, retrieve, and use information through systematic methods. This is not possible when students do not all come to the libraries. Information literacy sessions must be presented to students using various means. The regional study centers can provide audiovisual and printed material. Interactive sessions in digital format designed using animation techniques are provided on the website.

1.11 Distance Education as a Revenue Generation Opportunity
The running financial crisis has led to a decrease in funds available to libraries everywhere. There must be a creative method to generate fund for an academic library.

Anne Marie Casey and Michael Lorenzen (2010)[16] raise this issue by exploring possible donors through alumni networks from distance education programs. A shift from private funding to public funding in the United States took place in the mid–20 century, when "[a]cademic libraries in public universities and colleges were well funded by their parent institutions which were receiving charitable public funding". But recent writings indicate that current political and economic environment is less compassionate to publicly funding libraries and higher education institutions

It is important for librarians to keep up a strong civic presence as stewards of necessary democratic information for public support, Casey and Lorenzen suggest reinstate outreach initiative to tap into the prospective private support obtainable by distance education networks.

Conclusion/Suggestions

The wealth of technological options available today enables the provision of library and information services to students in a way that can increase the quality of the courses. Vassie (1999)[17] observes that, if "distance holds the key to growth" in the future of higher education, it is essential that providers of distance learning courses give more attention to student support services like access to libraries and information. Librarians can innovate new and user-specific services using the available technology and enter serve distance learners. Technology can play a key role in a distance education library system. Two significant areas of support to this system are:

- access to information; and the
- delivery of information.

Libraries in distance teaching institutions, therefore, should try to convert all their bibliographic records to computer readable formats in order to offer remote students with access to their collections and services through an online facility. IT can solve a number of problems associated with studying at a distance. Online access to computerized catalogues not only provides access to the local library's database, but also to the remote databases and catalogues of other libraries through national and international gateways.

But providing bibliographic information about a document is only the beginning of library and information services. Access to the actual document or the information stored therein is the ultimate requirement of the client. The distance between the library and the student adds a facet to the delivery of distance library services that traditional library and information services do not have to consider. The use of IT to access databases that provide full text information can solve this problem to a great extent. Other technologies that can help considerably in the document delivery process include E-mail and fax. Journal articles can be easily transmitted by these technologies. Thus, in addition to providing books, libraries have a vital role in providing multi-media resources to support distance education. The availability of a well-equipped media centre for distance learners is therefore essential if all modern technological innovations are to be exploited to their fullest. The resources of such a service would include in- house and commercially produced multi-media learning packages. Bibliographic multi-media instruction for distance learners is therefore an important task that distance librarians have to perform.

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