

Outreach Library Services for Distance Learners

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Abstract

Distance Learning has made tremendous growth all over the world during the last three decades. The growth in number of distance learning institutions, increase in number of programmes/courses, exponential growth in literature on distance learning, increasing number of conferences and the growth in number of distance learners all these have contributed immensely towards the development and maturation of a strong and sustainable system of education. However, equitable access to Library, Information and Documentation (LID) services is far from satisfactory as compared to their availability to learners at conventional education institutions. This paper analyses the issues relating to design, development, management, and technology of providing access to quality library and information services to distance learners.

Key Terms: Library Services; Transactional Education; Distance Learners; Virtual Library, Virtual School, Distance Education Programs

1. Introduction

We have witnessed some very dynamic changes in the development of distance education, ranging from the first generation print based correspondence model to the fifth generation intelligent, flexible learning during the last few decades. Seamless access, learners-centeredness, innovativeness dynamism and capacity to accommodate change are some of the basic characteristics of technology-enabled distance education. Never before, we were able to provide education on demand in real time to reach even sparsely located communities. The role and importance of library and information services in acquiring new knowledge and propelling advancement of frontier of knowledge in higher education are well understood by all. However, to ensure cost effectiveness, some open distance learning institutions have developed a false notion that the well-designed and developed course material alone is sufficient for learning

through distance mode. We have to realize that often learners in distance education are very motivated and focused in acquiring knowledge and therefore need strong support in the form of library and information services also. It is encouraging to see as emerging dimension of support through the virtual libraries in the form of additional research, review and referral material. Fortunately, the open and distance learning system has assimilated and fruitfully absorbed dynamic developments in information and communication technology and are therefore in a better position today to meet the demands of virtual library services for distance education learners.

There is general contemporary trend about the realization of the significance, importance and relevance of library services to support the distance learners. Now there is a greater visible focus on providing distance learners with a variety of library services, including document delivery in portable document format, access to digital libraries, e-mail reference services, virtual reference desks, and online literature searches of databases, etc. Several institutions are engaged in developing learning resource portals for different target groups of learners, with a view to provide area specific web-based information and services to learners, and save their time from browsing the unlimited information available on the Internet. We feel that there is a greater need to develop online resources support, and virtual search environment for the benefit of a fairly large cross section of learners and professionals.

2. Review of Literature

QAA (1999) ¹

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK defines distance learning a little more broadly as “a way of providing higher education that involves the transfer to the students location of the materials that from the main basis of study, rather than the student moving to the location of the resource provider”. It goes on to identify four broad types of distance learning :

- Materials based learning,
- Courses where parts are delivered by travelling teacher,
- Learning that is supported locally, and
- Learning that is supported by a remote provider

SCONUL (2001a) ²

The Society of College, National and University Libraries has recently produced an excellent Briefing Paper on Access for Distance Learners in which it very simply defines distance learners as “those who are separated by distance or by available time from the institution at which they are registered for a course of study”.

Tam (2001) ³

Defines, particularly when faced with such an array of learning materials, distance students clearly need guidance and support in their studies. The University, therefore, provides extensive support through tutorials, day schools, telephones tuition and,

increasingly, online communication with tutors and fellow students-as well as self-study centres and both a physical and an electronic library

DETC (2003)⁴

The Distance Education Training Council developed a set of standards used to evaluate distance learning programs. The standards, published in 2003, were developed “with the advice and cooperation of outstanding authorities on education and accreditation”

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3. Tam, Sheung-Wai.(2001), “Reflection on Open and Distance Learning”. Public Lecture on the occasion of his receiving the International council for Open and Distance Education: Prize of Excellence for individuals, 2001. Oslo, Norway. December.
4. Distance Education and Training Council (2003). Accreditation Standard. Available on the Web at <http://detc.org/content/accreditHandbk.html>

3. What is Distance Learning?

Distance learning means any students who live so far away from the institution at which they are registered as to make it difficult or impossible for them to derive the same benefit from existing library services as campus-based students. It also means students whose personal or work circumstances may prevent them attending at times, which make it possible to benefit from those services. Some students, of course, fall into both categories.

4. Why Library Services for Distance Learners?

The university library may wish to develop services to support its distance learners for a number of reasons. The university, and therefore the library, may have a strategic commitment to distance provision with a view to achieving success in this new global market. Effective library provision will underpin the marketing, recruitment and retention of distance learners, and funding and quality agencies will expect to see suitable learning support services in place. The library itself may have a policy of equality of access for all its users who may themselves begin to exert pressure for more support. It is certainly true to say that providing effective services for distance learners reinforces the value of the library within the institution.

5. Services for the Distance Learners

The role of the library is central in all type of education, conventional mode as well as distance mode. Hence it is necessary to provide a good deal of planning and organization of library and information services from the headquarters level at the top

to the study centre level at the grass root level in an Open University . It is the responsibility of the LIS professional to provide right library and information services to right user at the appropriate time. We should seriously consider the following agenda for action for the development of library and information services.

Information Technology

Today we are living in the age of information society and the role of IT is pivotal in providing library and information services. The Computerization and Networking should include the following

1. To enter data of entire library collection in appropriate library software packages
2. To connect Regional Centre's libraries with the Headquarters Centre library through networking
3. To connect study centre's libraries located at different colleges with the headquarters central library and the library of the Regional Centres
4. To link the library system with the Internet and suitable existing system and Networks in the country such as, INFLIBNET, NICNET, DELNET, the proposed OPENT etc.,

Satellite Collection

Some of the distance teaching institutions have an arrangement with public libraries for the establishment of Library Corners for Distance Learners (LCDL) in their libraries. These collections are based on the needs of distance students who can go to these public libraries and use their collection and also the following

- Multimedia
- Interlibrary Cooperation
- Information Literacy
- Finance
- Training of manpower
- Personal

6. Essential Elements for Institution of Global or Transactional Education

The following checklist represents a synthesis of the factors which have been identified through this study as essential to the establishment and substance of international distance learning programs:

Socio-Cultural Base

1. International Peace
2. International Prosperity
3. International Understanding
4. Successful Communication among Peoples and Nations
5. Successful Cooperation among Peoples and Nations

6. International Strategic Alliances
7. Successful Transactional Partnership of Institutions, Government Agencies, and Private Business
8. Culture of Shared Leadership

Quality Assurance Though

1. Internal Evaluation
2. External Evaluation
3. International Expertise in Evaluation
4. Established and Equitable Standards and Practices
5. Professional Faculty Standards and Practices
6. Equitable Assessment of Students Skills and Competencies
7. Demonstration of how Institutional Goals are to be achieved
8. Maintaining Quality across Variation in course media and methods
9. Maintaining accuracy of Course Description across variation in course format
10. Drawing upon the Experience and Critical Function of Traditional Universities
11. Establishment and selection of Best Practices through Partnership[p
12. International Exchange of Knowledge
13. International Interactive Networking
14. International Mobility of Teachers and Students
15. International Research Projects
16. Comparable Degrees
17. Comparable Credits
18. Account for National Cultural Values and Circumstances
19. Internet Access
20. Internet Based Courses and Programs
21. Internet supported Courses or Programs
22. Internet Based Information Searching
23. Internet Based Collaboration and Exchange
24. Institutional and Inter-Institutional Networks
25. Interactive Compatibility of Institutional System
26. Equitable Transfer of Knowledge
27. Teaching Electronic Learning Competencies or Information Literacy
28. Teaching of Lifelong Learning skills
29. Preparation for complex Globalization Challenges
30. Preparation for the International Labour Market
31. International Free Flow of Educational Services
32. Equality of Access
33. Equal Condition of support of knowledge development

7. ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services

Percept 1: Superior academic skills

Percept 2: Lifelong learning skills

- Percept 3: Equivalent teaching and learning result through equivalent library services
- Percept 4: Responsible institutional support through separate funding
- Percept 5: Technical linkages
- Percept 6: Compliance with national, regional, and professional; accreditation of programs.
- Percept 7: Library involvement in program development
- Percept 8: Program accountability through outcomes assessment
- Percept 9: Equivalent services through innovative approaches
- Percept 10: Resources and services consistent with broader institutional mission

8. IGNOU Web based Information services

IGNOU library has planned to provide web based information regarding:

1. Complete catalogue of IGNOU's print, audio and video programmes
2. Question papers of the examination of the previous year from 1987 to 2000
3. Catalogue of the Central library
4. Holding of Journal received at the L&DD
5. Catalogues of theses, IGNOU course materials microfiches and microfilms, holding of CD-ROMs and other databases.

9. Developing Successful Services

Library managers should consider a variety of factors when developing successful distance learner services. These relate to providers, users, library staff, legal issues and partnership working. The USA and India have commended taken a lead in developing national guidelines, but there are no national standards for Library Services to distance learner in many other countries, and this may be an issue for the International Federation of Library Association and Institution itself to consider.

Librarians need to work closely with the academic colleagues who provide the course and understand the pedagogy involved. Library services must facilitate the learning outcomes for the course and have relevance to the subject concerned. Ideally they should be embedded in the course itself. The development of virtual learning environments provides a good opportunity for librarians to work with academic staff to deliver and support distance learning.

It is important to understand the needs of the distance learners themselves and the learning process they are going through, since these may be quite different from those of campus-based learners. It is useful to know something about the profile of users, their countries, situations, pressures and expectations. Many of the services so far described are delivered over the Web, but in some countries users have limited access to information technology and they may have poor IT and information skills. Indeed, free access to the Internet is denied in some countries. In one way one should encourage distance learners to make full use of our services, but in another one has to manage their expectations. However, as it has been noted, there are dangers in trying to define distance learners too closely as a group because they are as the campus learners.

Students in general are choosing modes of study and support that suit their particular circumstances.

Services, whether traditional or electronic, must be appropriate, sustainable and affordable. Managers may choose to develop special new services for distance learners or they may simply extend existing ones. They may create a special unit for distance support, particularly in the first instance, or they may seek to integrate these services with general provision. Publicity, marketing and arrangement for authentication require special attention. Provision should be made for information skills training and for arranging access to users' local libraries and learning centres. The quality of services can be assured through service standards and suitable arrangements for monitoring and feedback. Some libraries choose to simplify and customise their computer interfaces to assist distance learners.

10. IT for Library Services

The library professionals in India already exposed to the offshoot of information Technology (IT) for information services such as library software systems to handle the in-house operations, CD-ROM and electronic database for bibliographic as well as numeric and full text/image information. The availability of a wide variety of library automation software on different platforms (both hardware and software) to suit the needs of libraries of various sizes itself is a reflection of the progress our libraries have made in this important attempt to fine tune the manual operations of procuring, processing and providing information sources. CD-ROM is common nowadays and libraries hold a good amount of them not only of database, but also those that comes with books and other reference sources. Managing and servicing these high capacity discs were a problem as they are to be serviced only through stand-alone devices. Now, the onset of networking and hard disk cached solutions provide an effective and functional way to enable access to a considerable set of information in electronic form. With the emergence of Internet and web as the global information superhighway, librarians like other professional are experiencing the benefits of ever-pervasive electronic information. More librarians have now a website and they use the site to inform others about the strengths of the library and to clients as a one-stop forum to receive certain services such as OPAC, on-line access of electronic information. Though the professional are concerned with the poor search efficacy of Internet search engines, they know the utility of web as a first stop for answering reference queries, and to use it as a platform to furnish electronic information such as web access of subscribe journals.

Another development that has received much enthusiasm in recent times is that of hosting digital libraries on general and special information resources. Libraries in India are also getting engaged in the development of prototypes of digital information resources. There are certain types of contents which lie inaccessible or less used now, due to its present physical form, may be put into a more visible and enhanced use as a result of digitization. Also heavily used contents in limited physical copies can also be identified for conversion to electronic form. To demonstrate the efficacy of digital libraries and collections, libraries must be able to identify materials in the public

domain; sources generated in-house etc., by easily bypassing the constraints of copyright. Thus, IT adoptions for library applications is an ongoing process right from procuring enabled information products to their computer aided processing and management to IT enriched services.

11. IT enabled Library Services for distance education

Information Sources Required

Bibliographic

- Online Public Access Catalogue of the Library and/or Union databases from other similar facilities
- Subject/Discipline specific commercial electronic databases such as EconLit for economics, ERIC for education etc.

Full Text

- Lecture notes, research reports and course materials produced by the University
- Proceedings of conferences held locally
- Resources from friendly / collaborating Institutions
- Full Text access of subscribed journals, commercial electronic database
- E-journal, e-books both free and paid

Server infrastructure

- Database server to hold library automation system and to conduct house keeping tasks
- CD-ROM server to provide on-campus access (after validating user name and password plus other security restrictions if any) to bibliographic and full text databases
- Web Server to hold and service locally generated digital collection, e-journals, e-books.
- Multimedia systems/VCP/VCR to service in VCDs/Video cassettes.

Client infrastructure

Multimedia machines set up within the university through LAN as clients to provide access to regular students may also act clients for distance education students during contact programmes. However, the prime necessity is to arrange these client resources in the student's place either by providing this infrastructure in regional centres and in other places by making an alliance with private computer centres/internet cafes after incorporating the necessary security mechanisms for such public machines to access protected servers of the University. Students would need access to a computer that can send and receive e-mails, that permits access of university's servers with reliable connections to an Internet Service Providers (ISP). They should also need access to a VCR/VCP to play videotaped instruction.

Services

Apart from all/any services of academic libraries mean for regular education (such as OPAC search services, database search services-current as well as retrospective), the distance learning libraries can think of the following

- Provision to access the library resources and avail library services through various means of WAN
- Off-campus access to electronic resources for valid distance education students who wish to access them from their home/place of work
- Web/remote access of course materials
- Receipt and answer of queries about information sources, services etc., through email/chat.

Distance Learning Success factors in the RRP Cycle and Virtual Schools Accreditation Standards

Virtual school administrators and course designers can address the needs of virtual school students using established quality guidelines and standards. The development and implementation of effective distance education happens in an iterative cycle. The three stages in the cycle are

1. Procurement and preparation of the resources necessary to meet the distance education goals.
2. Delivery of instruction using the best practices from education, business and research and
3. Analysis of the results of distance education to gauge achievement of the goals. Each stage of the Resources – Practices – Results (RPR) cycle continually realized in the other stages. The success of web-based virtual schools programs in part relies on the program's adherence to quality benchmarks.

Quality in Virtual School Distance Education

In its December 2000 report to Congress, the Web-Based Education Commission made high quality online educational content one of its seven critical issues. In order for a students or institution to determine whether quality has been achieved, quality must be defined. Virtual schools programs must serve the virtual schools in meeting their goals. A central goal of education is developing independent learners who can capably apply their knowledge to new situations. To ensure that virtual schools offering meet this goal, designers must identify desired learning outcomes, instructional strategies and evaluation methods. Quality indicates that instruction is effective and appropriate. The assessment of quality virtual school programs may include quantitative elements, such as completion rates, student's performance and student evaluations of the learning experience. Qualitative dimension may include ratings of teaching-learning events, materials, learning process, pace, activities, content, usability, accessibility and options offered to students. Performance in each measure of quality depends on the distance education experience being fully appropriate to all users. Seven groups have published eccreditations standards that have been adopted by American virtual schools. Three of the groups operate at the national level: the National Private School Accreditation Alliance, also known as the National Private School Association

The Accrediting Commission for Independent study

1. The Independent Study and
2. The Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education Training Council

Four groups have regional jurisdiction

1. The North Central Association on Accreditation and school improvement, also known as the North central association of colleges and schools
2. The NorthWest association of schools and colleges and universities
3. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and
4. Western Association of schools and colleges.

The Quality Distance Education Cycle

The process of developing and implementing effective virtual school education happens in an iterative cycle. Broadly considered, the three stages in the cycle are

1. Procurement and preparation of the resources necessary to meet the distance education goals.
2. Delivery of instruction using the best practices from education, business and research and
3. Analysis of the results of distance education to gauge achievement of the goals each stage of the **Resources-Practices-Result (RPR)** cycle, continually revisits lessons learned in the other stages and builds upon the successes realized in the other stages. Each stage requires participation of all stakeholders, including students, instructors, support and design professionals, administrators and the community. The success factors included in each stage are based on decades of research and experience with learners from professions, higher education and K-12 education.

12. The Resources Phase of the RPR Cycle

The resources required to sustain a quality virtual school education program exist to support students, faculty and the program or school toward achieving the goal of effective and appropriate learning. Responsiveness and flexible human resource, knowledge, skills, policies, procedures and technical infrastructure enable practices and contribute to quality results. Procurement, development and adaptation of resources are ongoing processes.

Success factors for the Resources Phase

- School policy that values distance education
- Strategic plan for delivering distance education to students
- Stakeholders analysis to determine needs of graduates
- Financial commitment that gives the direction regarding program implementation
- Team support for distance educators and students
- Appropriate technology infrastructure

- Program standards to guide course design and delivery
- Program review to ensure that all components of the program meet standards and to ensure that the standards contribute to program goals
- Effective communication of policies and expectations to students
- Student services : information, advising, orientation and security
- Information privacy
- Qualified, experienced staff and faculty
- Community involvement in the program's goal, policies and outcomes
- Information provided to faculty about teaching in the distance earning environment
- Instructor release time for course development
- Instructor training in distance education pedagogy and technology
- Course design and delivery assistance
- Well-designed and appropriate learning materials
- Student orientation and training
- Student access to learning resources and instructors
- Technology plan to communicate goals to all user.

13. The Practice Phase of the RPR Cycle

With the right resources in place, the stage is set for dramatic virtual school learning performance. At this point the spotlight shifts from the institution to the instructor. Quality virtual school teaching begins with the careful design of courses, materials and learning activities. Next, the practices employed during instruction will aim at developing independent learners with the ability to transfer their learning to novel situations. Throughout the course, effective communication and community building are essential foundations for all events

Success factors for the Practices Phase

- Focus on content and students
- Relevant and important skills and knowledge addressed in courses
- Structured information presented in motivating context
- Social strategies to promote student comfort, control, challenge
- Fast feedback from instructor to students
- Consistent and accessible design throughout each course
- Highly interactive activities for students engagement
- Authentic communication among students, instructors and experts
- Course activities designed to maximize student motivation
- Activities focused on high-level cognitive skills
- Development of information literacy
- Development of applied technical skills.

14. The Result Phase of the RPR Cycle

The only way to know whether a virtual school distance education program has achieved quality is to compare the program results to established quality benchmark. Measures of quality are tied to school goals, and respond to the specific context of the program. To maintain success, a virtual school program evaluation must account for institutional and instructional factors as well as student factors. Evaluation of course and program results is a continual process that involves all stakeholders and requires a wide range of tools. Success is evaluated by through assessment of student learning, program review and program accreditation.

Success factors for the Result Phase

- Students independence developed through opportunities for self-assessment
- Peer review of student work as a professional experience
- Creation of student portfolios to showcase accomplishment
- Varied assessment for an accurate view of student abilities
- Open-ended assignment to increase thinking skills and reduce cheating
- Secure online testing
- Ongoing course evaluation by students
- Evaluation of program by students and faculty
- Review of program outcomes and components by all stakeholders
- Program accreditation

15. Conclusion

I conclude that, Library support is an integral part of quality education and vital services that should be available to all distance learners. While many institution throughout the world which are offering distance education programmes attempt to provide pertinent services, students in developing countries are often hampered by the unavailable of such basics facilities. It is essential for Distance Librarians to find new and innovative methods to provide the enumerated services. They need to exhibit more dynamism, be more responsive to their clients, needs and become more involved at many levels for actively pursuing the institutional objectives.

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