

Library and information services as a major input for assuring quality in Library and Information Science courses conducted through distance education in India

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ABSTRACT

The paper introduces the concept of distance education. The Library and Information Science course scenario through distance mode in India is presented. The importance of providing library and information services for the distance learners of Library and Information Science courses to enhance quality is discussed. The paper points out that web based information services can be utilized for extending library and information services to the distance learners. The various options and resources available for rendering library and information services are discussed in detail. A total re-engineering of the library and information services is highlighted.

1. Introduction

The formal education consists of interaction between the students and the faculty in classrooms of educational institutions. In this method, face-to-face communication takes place between them. The students are benefited from the lecture and practical classes. 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 all these methods is the separateness of the learner from the institution, which imparts the education.

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Correspondence education is such a method that enables faculty and students to communicate with one another by using the course materials mailed to them. These 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.

In correspondence courses students who register with an institution will get printed courses materials in separate modules who are also directed to attend the contact classes conducted periodically. Of course, in most cases this is not compulsory. With the liberalization of higher education in India, many universities have started correspondence courses. They offer many traditional subjects in arts and humanities and professional courses like Library and Information Science. The number of students taking part in these courses is increasing every year. But the institutions are not providing student support services, especially library and information services. Lebowitz (1997) laments that “there is little or no recognition of the central role that library plays in support of the quality of education or in the development of life long learning skills. Although many consider the library to be the heart of the university, the use of the library is often not incorporated into courses being prepared for distance delivery”. The average distance learner is an adult, often with work and family obligations, who is studying part-time. These learners generally lack peer group support for their studies and usually have very limited time for going to the library and search for the relevant literature.

A proactive role and re-engineering of the library and information services are required, as the learner is not only separated from the institution in which he/she is studying but also from the library of that institution. The concept of library services for distance learners is very little discussed in India and the authorities concerned claim that the learning materials supplied to students are exhaustive enough to complete their studies.

2. LIS Distance Education Scenario in India

Several universities in India offer Library and Information Science courses through distance education. The courses vary from certificate level to M.Phil level.

But the library and information services offered by these universities to the students are very negligible, except the regional offices they have at several regions, which usually undertake the registration and examination works of the university. The libraries in these centers are neither equipped with a substantial collection nor provide services to the students. The students of these courses are hence facing difficulties for getting the required information for completing their assignments and examinations. They face the examination without any supplementary reading. The literature useful for the professional courses like library and information science is not usually available in the public libraries and the academic libraries nearer to them. It is the responsibility of the concerned university and its library to provide the students with the required resources. The quality of the courses can only be assured through establishing student support services like library and information support.

3. Need for Library and Information services

Library professionals all over the world have agreed to the fact that the students of distance education are eligible for equal library services as that of the campus-based students. This is evident from the fact that the various guidelines provided by the various organizations have specifically pointed out this equity issue. The Association of College and Research Libraries guidelines (2004) specify “Access to adequate library services and resources is essential for the attainment of superior academic skills in post-secondary education, regardless of where students, faculty and programs are located. 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”. The ACRL has been thinking and providing the right direction in the provision of library services to distance learners. The Sectional Committee of the Indian Library Association on Distance Education (2001) has specified that “The institutes providing distance education are also responsible for providing services to the distance learners. Traditional library services in no way can be stretched to meet the information demands of distance learners as they face distinct and different challenges involving library access and information delivery. We have to find new ways and means to provide access to information to this highly dynamic and ever increasing community of users.” The Indian library Association also thereby

emphasizes the same philosophy of providing equitable library services for distance learners.

4. Web based Library and information services

Unlike paper documents, computer-stored library documents can be made available anywhere where another computer can make a phone contact with the library. 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 near by or in another distant location. Further the e-mail facility makes it easy to contact anybody at any time anywhere in the world in few seconds. Not only that large amount of information can also be attached over an e-mail message. Hence the web opens new windows of opportunity to provide information support to the distance learners. Neimi, Ehrard and Neeley (1998) 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”.

Some of the library and information services that can be offered over the net to the distance learners are discussed in the foregoing sections.

4.1. Library website as a library counter

A *website* is a hypermedia document or a collection of hypermedia documents that are linked together under a single subject or institution name. (Fletcher, 2000) A university website can contain websites of its library and various faculty. Usually there will be a starting point for the website which will also be an index to the various linked websites. This initial page is called the *home page*. This provides the users with the key information required to locate various provisions within the website. There will be hyperlinks provided on the homepage directing us to the provisions within and outside the website. Now let us discuss the various services that can be offered to the students of Library and Information Science distance education through this window the home page of the library.

4.2. OPAC

The catalogue of a library in the electronic format available on the website is known as the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). This facilitates the distance learners to browse the catalogue using any of the search options such as author, title, subject etc. This helps the student to find the availability of the item in the library. The library can also provide links to the OPACs of other libraries who would like to be in the consortia for co-operation.

4.3. Document Delivery services through regional study centers

A student can place request for Document Delivery Service to the Library after browsing the OPAC. The request should be placed to the nearest study center if it is a printed book. The library on getting the request from the regional study center will 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.

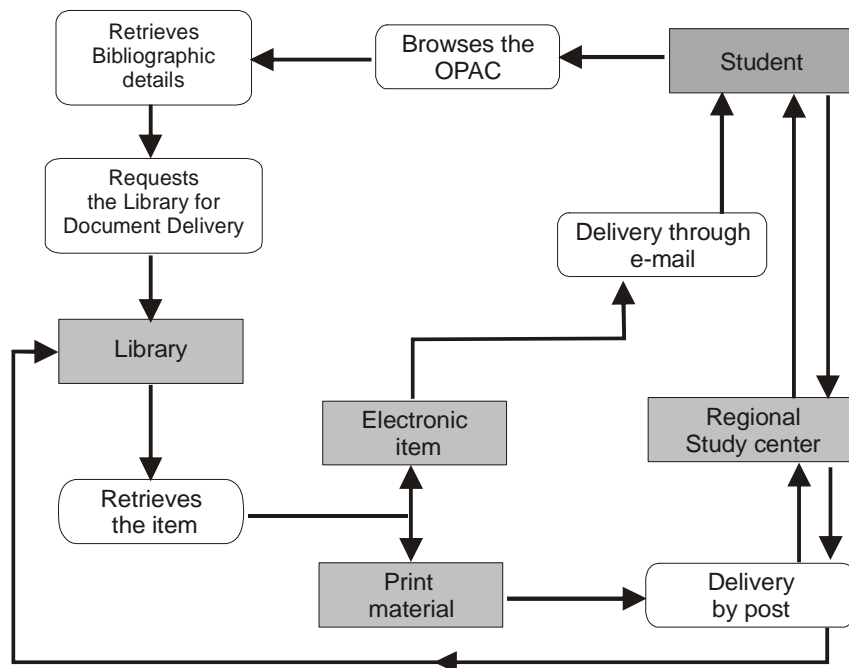


Figure 1 : Document Delivery Service for Distance learners

If the student requests a document in the electronic format the library can send it to the e-mail account of the student subject to copyright stipulations. Usually the copyright provisions are not in favour of providing such a service on an exhaustive basis. Gasway (1998) observes that “in the United States, copyright law often proves to be an impediment to distance learning, and no one is sure how fair use will be extended to remote instruction in the digital age”. The statues in India are not at all clear in the case of copyright and we have not updated the statues in pace with the advancement of technology.

4.4. Electronic Reference Services

E-mail can be effectively used as a means for providing reference service from a library. Slade (2000) lists the advantages of e-mail 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 of the Library and Information Science course may be allowed to approach the library for his reference needs through e-mail. The student’s information request can be directed to a subject specialist faculty. As per his suggestion the specified documents can be forwarded to the student. The process is to be carried out cautiously as the relevance of the document mainly depends on how far clear the request of the student was. As the request was through e-mail and no further clarification in the form of a reference interview was possible, the relevance of the document can be determined only when it reaches the student. Hence the involvement of the subject expert is highly essential. In the on-campus library, the librarians conduct face-to-face interview with students to provide reference assistance. Gandhi (2003) says “in the distance-learning environment, geographic separation makes it difficult for librarians to determine the information needs of distance learners via face-to-face interviews”.

The 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.

The students have assignments to complete during the course. They can submit the assignments to the faculty through e-mail. Usually the corrected assignments are not returned to the students. Now the faculty can correct the assignments and provide tips through e-mail to improve the student’s knowledge in the subject

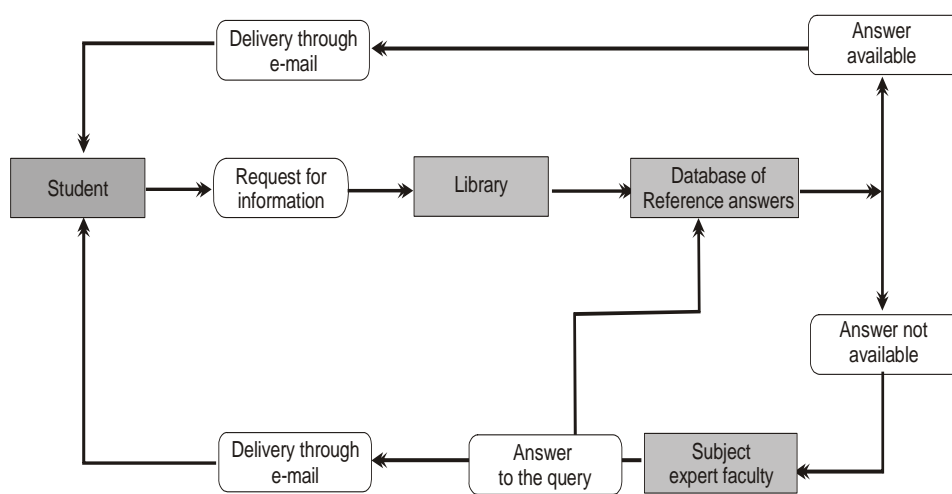


Figure 2 : E-mail Reference Service for Distance learners

4.5. Access to e-journals

Any journal that is available over the Internet can be called an e-journal. In some cases the print equivalents also will be available simultaneously and in some cases they may not. Some electronic journals are freely available. Others have charging mechanisms of different types. There are aggregators of these e-journals and they provide access to the full text content to authorized users. Usually they are IP authenticated that means they are made available only to computers with the specified IP numbers for which subscription is made. The publishers issue some directly. The publishers Emerald (www.emeraldinsight.com) and Taylor and Francis (www.journalsonline.tandf.co.uk) mostly cover the e-journals in the field of Library and information science.

E-journals offer many advantages and most obvious of them are the following.

- 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 are very easy. (Lee, 2002)

The e-journals subscribed by the library can be made available to the distance students too. They should be provided with user name and password so that it can be ensured that only authorized people are eligible to use the facility. The UGC supported INFLIBNET Center is maintaining a consortia of e-journals, which is available in most of the universities in India. The access to this facility can be given to the students till he/she finishes the course.

4.6. Provision of e-reserves

E-reserves are collections of digitized information sources like periodical articles, notes, solved problems etc. made available on the net, which contain useful information for a specific course and recommended by the faculty. The students can download and print the materials as per their requirement. This service is very helpful for the distance learners. This should also include previous question papers, complete study materials and the entire syllabus of the study. A list of recommended readings, recommended websites etc. are also some of the items that can also be included in the e-reserves. Since the contact classes for Library and Information courses are very limited and not mandatory that students should attend them, they face problems with the practical aspects in classification and cataloguing. Further there are several problems provided along with the study materials that the students have to work out for getting fluency in the practical applications. If the answers are provided along with the e-reserves it helps them very much.

Another important facility that the students expect is the previous question papers. Previous question papers can be digitized and provided on the website for

downloading and printing. This will give a proper orientation for the students to face the examination.

4.7. Information literacy

The subject of library instruction formerly called as bibliographic instruction or library orientation program holds major significance in the provision of library services to remote users. The new term, which denotes this concept, is Information Literacy. Information literacy is as a person's ability to identify, retrieve and use information through systematic methods. This is not possible when the students are not at all coming to the libraries. Hence Information literacy sessions have to be presented to the students using various means. The regional study centers can provide audiovisual materials and printed materials to the students. Interactive sessions in digital format designed using animation techniques are provided on the website.

4.8. Provision of online-reference tools

Some of the major reference sources are now available online. Encyclopedia Britannica (www.eb.com) and Oxford Dictionary (www.oxforddictionary.com) are some of the 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.

5. Conclusion

The wealth of telecommunications and other technological options available today enable the provision of library and information services to the students in a better way to increase the quality of the courses. To put it in the words of Vassie (1999), If "distance holds the key to growth" in the future of higher education, it is essential that providers of distance learning courses, for consolidating their position, should 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 into the field of serving the distance learners including that of the Library and information science courses, otherwise other interested groups will enter into our field of providing information provision.

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