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Assuring Quality in Distance Education for Library and Information Science: The Role of the Library

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Introduction

Face-to-face interaction between students and faculty in classrooms of educational institutions is traditional and widespread. This conventional system of education cannot accommodate all aspirants, whose numbers are ever increasing. This has resulted in devising alternative methods of education to satisfy demand. Hence, in addition to the conventional methods of instruction conducted in the premises of educational institutions, many colleges and universities have started offering education programs to the students in off-campus locations. Internationally, the mode of providing courses through non-formal methods has many manifestations, which are described using a variety of terms, including distance education, distance learning, off-campus education, open learning, flexible learning, extended learning, and so on. A common factor in all these methods is the separateness of the learner from the institution that imparts the education.

Correspondence education is a method that enables faculty and students to communicate with one another by using course materials that are mailed to them. These programs reduce costs, because they enable 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.

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 such as library and information science (LIS). 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 lifelong 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 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 authorities concerned claim that the learning materials supplied to students are exhaustive enough to complete their studies.

LIS Distance Education in India

Several universities in India offer LIS courses through distance education. The courses vary from certificate to M. Phil. level. But the library and information services offered by these universities to students are negligible, except in regional offices, which usually undertake the registration and examination functions 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 in getting the required information for completing their assignments and examinations. They face the examination without any supplementary reading. The literature useful for professional courses like LIS is not usually available in the public and academic libraries nearer to them. It is the responsibility of each university and its library to provide students with the required resources. The quality of the courses can only be assured by establishing student support services like library and information support.

Need for Library and Information Services

Library professionals agree that distance students are eligible for library services that equal those of the campus-based students. This is evident from the fact that the guidelines provided by various organizations have specifically pointed out this equity issue. The Association of College and Research Libraries guidelines (2004) specifies that, "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 Sectional Committee of the Indian Library Association on Distance Education (2001) has specified that "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.

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) 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 web to distance learners are discussed in the following sections.

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 (Fletcher, 2000) A university website 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 LIS distance students through the home page of the library.

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 consortial relationships.

Document Delivery through Regional Study Centers

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.
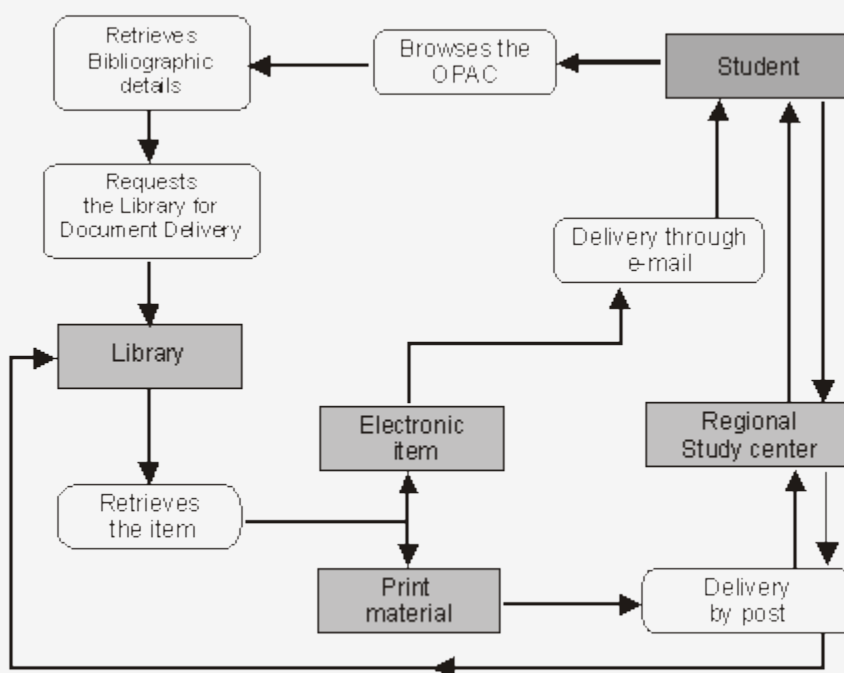

Figure 1 : Document Delivery Service for Distance learners

If the student requests an electronic document, the library can send it by email, subject to copyright stipulations. There are some copyright restrictions on this practice. 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.

Electronic Reference

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Email can be effectively used for providing reference service. Slade (2000) 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."

An LIS 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. 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".

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.
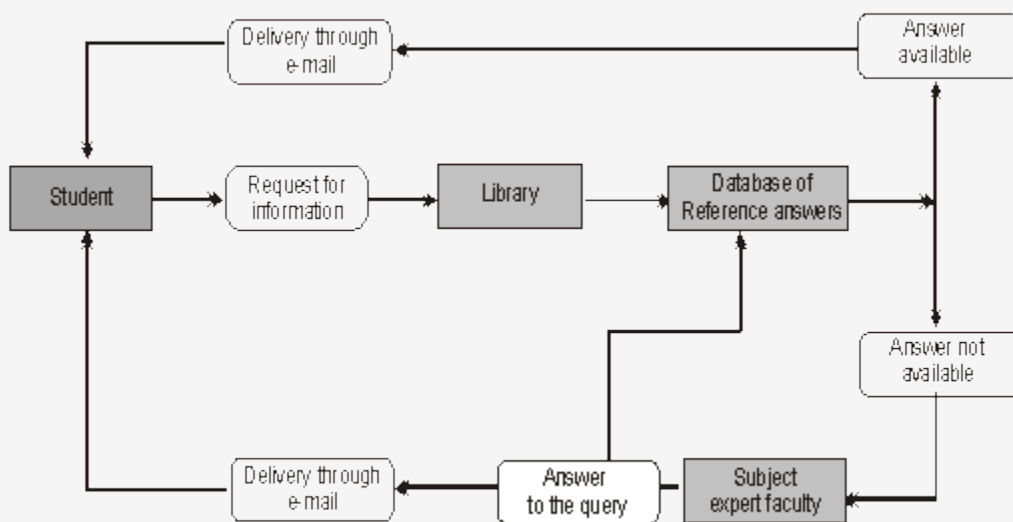

Figure 2 : E-mail Reference Service for Distance learners

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. The publishers issue some directly. The publishers Emerald (www.emeraldinsight.com) and Taylor and Francis (www.journalsonline.tandf.co.uk) cover e-journals in LIS.

E-journals offer many advantages, including:

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- 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 (Lee, 2002)

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 a 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.

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 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. Since face-to-face meetings for LIS distance courses are limited and not mandatory, they face problems with the practical aspects in classification and cataloguing. Exercises can be provided along with study materials that the students must complete to gain facility with practical applications. If the answers are provided along with the e-reserves, it is very helpful to students.

Students also expect 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 students to face examinations.

Information Literacy

Library instruction, formerly called bibliographic instruction or library orientation, 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 a person's ability 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.

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.

Conclusion

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) 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, including LIS students.

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