

## Libraries in Distance Education

NEELA JAGANNATHAN

Librarian in-charge, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi - 110068, India

Within the broad framework of the professional goals of an open university, this paper discusses the role, structure and functions of libraries and strategies for their future development in distance/open education institutions. The discussion is conducted with particular reference to the three-tier library system of the Indira Gandhi National Open University: with its network of libraries which originates at the Headquarters, and covers the Regional and Study Centres. Appropriately, broad contrasts are drawn with the libraries of the conventional universities.

The paper examines acquisition and management for the various types of libraries of IGNOU and information services which are provided to diverse clientele. It enumerates the various problems faced by the libraries of the open universities in the process of providing satisfactory services to learners.

The paper concludes with a comment on the need to augment the scarce resources -- collections, financial and human -- of distance education libraries by seeking cooperation from all types of libraries, viz. academic, special and public, for purposes of providing efficient services to distance learners be they in formal or non-formal streams of education.

### INTRODUCTION

The function of the library within any academic institution can be realised only in the context of the institution's philosophy of education. This statement may be examined through a discussion of the library system at the Indira Gandhi National Open University.

The main objectives of IGNOU are to advance and disseminate learning and knowledge by a diversity of means, including the use of modern communication technology to provide opportunities for higher education to masses including those who reside in remote and rural areas. Besides this, as the apex body for DE in the country, it supports open and distance education institutions throughout the country; it also seeks to coordinate and determine the standards of teaching-learning process through distance education in other open universities of India.

The Library and Documentation Division, being a part of IGNOU, must have its objectives in tune with those of IGNOU. The basic objectives of the library are :

- \* to develop appropriate collections in various disciplines for satisfying the needs of the diverse clientele of the libraries of the University, Regional and Study Centres;
- \* to provide reading, lending, reference, information and documentation facilities to all categories of staff and students;
- \* to develop special collection of distance education books and journals at the libraries of the Headquarters as well as Regional Centres;
- \* to provide documentation and comprehensive reference/information services in areas related to distance

education to other open universities of the world, and of India in particular.

### NETWORK PATTERN OF LIBRARIES AT OPEN UNIVERSITIES

Some libraries of the distance teaching universities, such as IGNOU, operate through the three-tier system: the main university library and the branch libraries at the regional and study centres. The two-tier system, functional in universities such as Bhimrao Ambedkar Open University of Andhra Pradesh in India and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand have the supporting libraries at study centres, directly responsible to the Central Library at Headquarters. These libraries comprise two distinct categories:

- a) Central Library at the University Headquarters,
- b) Libraries at the Regional and/or Study Centres as the branch libraries.

The Central Library combines the features and functions of both, a general academic library as well as a specialist library. This dual responsibility increases the complexity of library policies regarding the development of collections and provision of library and information services.

### ACQUISITION MANAGEMENT

The processes of selection, acquisition and organisation of the collections for the central and branch libraries vary a great deal from each other, as do the requirements of the clientele. The process of acquisition and organisation is centralised at the Central Library to ensure consistency in and standardisation of procedures in dealing with materials so available.

The selection of library materials is the joint responsibility of the librarian and the academic staff. Print and non-print materials such as books, periodicals, reports, graphic materials, maps, charts, pictures, posters, audio and video recordings, films, slides, microforms, computer floppies, magnetic databases, CD-ROMs, three dimensional artefacts like globes, models, dioramas, kits, etc. are acquired to facilitate the production of multi-media packages of course materials. The Central Library caters to the requirements of academic faculty members, course writers and editors, producers and media consultants, professional, technical and administrative staff involved in course development, i.e., planning, designing, developing, producing and distributing of multi-media packages.

Eventually these house-keeping operations will be computerised and networking of all types of libraries too. The library acquires multiple copies of books for the Regional and Study Centres. These are selected by the academic staff of the various disciplines, keeping in mind the availability and readability of the books, according to the course requirements and levels of the target groups. As far as possible, books recommended by the course writers as 'Suggested Readings' at the end of each unit or block (study materials) are acquired for regional and study centre libraries. The books are processed, i.e., accessioned, classified and catalogued at the Central Library before despatching them to the respective centres. The libraries of the Regional Centres are resource libraries which cater to the needs of academic and research scholars of the user academic institutions of the region; whereas the students and the part-time counsellors engaged to impart guidance to the learners in each discipline are the potential users of the core library at the study centres.

#### **DISTANCE LEARNERS AND THEIR LIBRARY REQUIREMENTS**

Distance learners are motivated, mature adults belonging to different socio-economic, cultural, educational and linguistic backgrounds. They vary widely in age, qualifications, aspirations and interests. They may be employed, unemployed, retired, single, married, housewives, physically disabled having varied social and financial problems. Their learning activity being part-time, it takes place in leisure hours, in the evenings and on holidays; they are generally irregular in their studies. They may either study individually at home, at work, in a library or in groups at study centres while attending counselling and contact programmes or elsewhere. They differ in their approach to studies, study skills, previous learning experiences, fluency of expression and biases. All these affect their academic pursuits.

Apart from this, the courses undertaken by the learners may be either conventional, highly technical and professional or they may involve creative skills. They may be of varied levels – ranging from elementary or introductory to advanced studies.

The library requirements of such varied sections of the learner population may be grouped under three categories:

- a) Need for materials and facilities
- b) Need for information services, and
- c) Need for user services

##### **a) Need for Materials and Facilities**

Distance learners require access to library resources either for reference on premises, for study at home or for inter-library loans. Though adequate care is taken to make the specially designed self-instructional, multi-media packages self-contained, learners of the postgraduate degree and diploma programmes have to depend on additional readings suggested at the end of each unit/block for responding to the assignments and preparation for examinations. Usually, they need the following materials and facilities :

- \* Reference materials/books and textbooks.
- \* Self-instructional materials and study packages developed by various distance teaching universities.
- \* Audio-visual and non-print materials from various organisations.
- \* Audio-video equipment and hardware, word processors or typewriters, photo copier/xerox machines, microfiche reader-cum-printer, computers, etc.
- \* An appropriately equipped room for the independent learners to meet and to hear/view audio-video programmes.

##### **b) Need for Information Services**

Before distance learners can have access to well-organised resources and facilities, there should be well trained library staff to collect, process, organise, store and disseminate information to users. Even if the materials are not available at the library, the staff should be able to provide up-to-date information about :

- \* bibliographical reference sources, books, journals, non-print materials available at their own library and those which can be borrowed on inter-library loan
- \* self-instructional materials, multi-media materials and educational programmes used for radio and television broadcasts
- \* various other organisations imparting education and training opportunities through distance mode and their courses
- \* regional and study centres, their contact and counselling programmes, summer schools, laboratory and library facilities, special lectures, available resources and facilities, etc.

##### **c) Need for User Services**

Adult, independent learners also need professional guidance and support from the library staff about:

- \* using the library collection
- \* using the available equipment and facilities at the library
- \* selecting the reading materials
- \* planning their learning
- \* utilising the study skills for self-learning

In order to fulfil these requirements, library staff should be willing to promote user education and information literacy. The librarian should arrange lectures or arrange for self-instructional video shows regarding the collection, its use and function, available equipment and facilities at the library. The services and holdings of the library need to be publicised. Printed information, library guides to the collection, posters, display of new-additions-notices, rules and regulations, instructions, etc. will encourage maximum use of the library.

#### **LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES TO DISTANCE LEARNERS**

The provision of library and information services is as vital for the distance learners as for their counterparts in conventional universities. Library policies of different distance teaching universities in India and abroad vary from zero provision of books to elaborate library services. In India, there are more than 40 universities offering correspondence courses but their library services to external students are negligible, whereas the library of the University of South Africa promotes distance teaching by providing elaborate library services. University of Manitoba in Canada, University of New England in New South Wales, Australia, Deakin University in Victoria, Australia, and University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, offering regular as well as correspondence (distance education) courses, give high priority to the provision of library services to their on-campus as well as off-campus students. They have the same multi-tier system comprising Central Library and libraries at study centres as we have in the Indian open universities, but their library services are much more useful because they lend books through postal/courier services and some of them provide xeroxed copies of journal articles from the Central Library, without any additional charges. In Thailand, students of the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, do not have access to libraries at their study centres. They usually use library services at the nearby public libraries, which keep the university study materials for general use by the public. The Public Library system in Thailand is well organised and has become very popular by promoting distance education and by providing library and information services to adult learners.

Unlike the libraries of the conventional universities which cater to some hundreds of faculty members, research scholars, students and administrators in a particular city, the libraries of the distance teaching universities have to cater to the needs of thousands of distance learners of diverse categories, scattered all over the

country or state. Again, the Central Library at the headquarters faces the challenging task of managing acquisitions and collections for the different categories of clientele, considering their requirements. They have not only to acquire, process, despatch and monitor the receipt of the books and non-print materials for the study centres but also to take policy decisions regarding the management of the branch libraries and provision of maximum services with minimum resources.

The libraries of both the National and the State Open Universities in India have been struggling hard to provide reading and reference services to their distance learners but they encounter enormous problems due to various constraints, such as, lack of infrastructural facilities at the centres, paucity of staff, limited finance, literature explosion, spiralling prices and complexity of demands from diverse users to name the major ones.

The regional and study centres, housed in the existing colleges and educational institutions, do not have enough accommodation for library stackrooms and reading rooms. Besides, due to lack of qualified, experienced and regular staff, proper information services cannot be provided. Circulation of books including issuing, adjustments of loans, reservation of books, etc. is not possible as learners' attendance at contact or counselling sessions is optional. Books are issued only for reference at the premises to prevent losses and ensure availability to other students. The students residing in rural and remote areas can use neither the reading nor the audio-video facilities at the study centre. Yet another problem is that of lack of books students look for. In a multi-lingual country like India, the learners of different states expect the open university to supply course materials, reference books, textbooks and audio-video programmes in the regional languages whereas standard textbooks in science, technology, engineering etc. in regional languages are not available easily.

In developing countries, where sophisticated gadgets like TV, VCR, taperecorder, radio, telephone, computer, etc. are not equally and adequately accessible to all the distance learners, library facilities have to remain one of the basic student support services more easily available to learners. Thus, libraries have a significant role to play in the viability and success of distance learning in our country.

But in the Indian context this tremendous task of providing library facilities to hundreds of thousands of students scattered all over the country cannot be accomplished by the distance teaching universities alone. They can meet the demands of the diverse learner populations by cooperating with all types of libraries, viz. academic, special and public, to extend appropriate library services to the learners. This can be achieved by bringing together all the existing libraries to utilise their infrastructural facilities and library resources, which otherwise remain idle on holidays and in evenings. This pro-

posal appears to be a reasonable agenda item for the newly set up Distance Education Council of IGNOU.

### CONCLUSION

It is obvious that a beginning has to be made by the distance teaching institutions to put their library facilities together for general use. The major initiative lies with the libraries of the various open universities to meet this challenge of providing effective and efficient services to the needy learners. Automation of library operations and networking of all types of libraries can facilitate the extension of the library and information services to distance learners. The librarians have to take policy decisions regarding the maximum use of existing resources. They should work to maintain a balance between the

conflicting demands of rendering services primarily to institutional staff and at the same time making the resources available also to the adult, mature students pursuing studies independently by making appropriate arrangements. The development of a network of public libraries in each state with interstate linkages to form a national network will serve the potential group of distance learners along with the general public. No doubt, this may seem difficult in this era of financial constraints but it is not impossible as the technology needed is easily available. It presents a challenge to the librarians as it means reassessing and changing traditional attitudes and aims "towards the educational role of public libraries and the public role of academic libraries" (Fisher - 1988).

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