

RENDERING EQUITABLE LIBRARY SERVICES TO DISTANCE LEARNERS IN INDIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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INTRODUCTION

The national development of a vast, multi-lingual and multi-cultural country like India poses tremendous challenges to its planners and administrators. Education, a principal vehicle for national development has, since independence, been a major concern to the Indian government. A particular need is to provide equitable access to higher education to all those who wish to study at that level. In order to assist the government with its plans and programmes to develop education, various commissions and committees have been appointed to make recommendations for the reorganisation of the education system of the country.

Strongly recommended by a number of the governmental bodies that looked at education was the use of distance education as a means of responding to the high demand for education in India. Distance education appealed for number of reasons. Distance education has developed from simple correspondence courses to modular, multi-media packages. In addition distance education could:

- rapidly supply places for the expanding number of persons seeking access to higher education;
- compensate for the inability of existing conventional academic institutions to provide places for all those who wished to study at the tertiary level;
- reduce the pressure on the Government to establish additional conventional universities to satisfy the number of persons who were seeking entry to institutions of higher learning; and
- provide training in all fields and at all levels without causing major disruptions to the domestic and economic lives of students.

GROWTH OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN INDIA

One noticeable development of the 1960s and 1970s was the growth in the number of educational institutions and universities in India. In spite of this they were not able to satisfy the demand for higher education. The yearly graduates from the school system as well as persons who were already in the workforce created extreme pressure on the existing tertiary institutions. Under the aegis of the Ministry of Education a committee, chaired by Dr. D.S. Kothari, examined the feasibility of establishing correspondence courses. Based on the recommendations of this committee, correspondence courses were introduced as a pilot project at the University of Delhi in 1962. Today, out of about 190 conventional universities, more than 40 are dual-mode universities offering correspondence courses from undergraduate to postgraduate levels. Despite this growth, the demand for tertiary education was still not satisfied.

Against this background, the Andhra Pradesh Open University (APOU), renamed the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) was established by an Act of the State Legislature in August 1982. It proved to be a significant and unprecedented approach to reduce the pressure on gaining access to tertiary education in India.



Map 1: IGNOU centres

The success of the BRAOU to provide undergraduate and professional courses for unprecedented numbers of students caused many state governments to take similar steps to establish open universities in their states. Since then, four more state open universities have been established. They are:

- Kota Open University, Rajasthan, 1987
- Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU), Maharashtra, 1989
- Nalanda Open University (NOU), Bihar, 1989
- Raja Bhoj Open University (RBOU), Madhya Pradesh, 1993.

States which currently do not have an open university view the establishment of such an institution as an important priority. Open universities in India have adopted a flexible approach to enrollment, age of entry, choice of courses, methods of instruction, attending examinations, self-pacing and the removal of time and place barriers, all within the context of providing a high-quality of education using a multi-media approach.

INDIRA GHANDI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY (IGNOU): AN OVERVIEW

IGNOU's responsibility is to provide distance education opportunities at the national level. This places IGNOU at the apex of open universities and distance teaching institutions in the country. IGNOU, located in New Delhi, was established by an Act of Parliament in 1985. The mandate of IGNOU gives it responsibility to improve the access of 850 million people to tertiary level education. A land area of approximately 3.3 million square kilometres, with a north-south span of approximately 3,220 kilometres and an east-west spread of 2,977 kilometres gives a picture of the enormity of IGNOU's responsibility. Also included in IGNOU's jurisdiction are the Andaman, Nicobar and Lakshadweep Islands.

As a national open university one of IGNOU's principle aims is to strengthen and promote distance education nationally. Another aim is to widen access to higher education through the use of distance education methodologies.

Organisational structure of IGNOU

The organisational structure of IGNOU differs considerably from those of conventional universities. The largest administrative units at IGNOU are its Schools and Divisions. Schools of Studies in the major disciplines have principal responsibility for the design, development preparation and maintenance of the self-instructional course materials. The Divisions and Sections are mandated to produce and distribute course materials – print and nonprint; to perform student admissions and evaluation duties; to keep and manage student records and to provide support to students including academic counselling and library services. Table 1 is an organisational chart of IGNOU.

A unique aspect of IGNOU's organisational structure is the Regional Services Division.

Regional Services Division

The basic function of IGNOU's Regional Services Division (RSD) is to identify suitable places and institutions where Regional Centres (RC) and Study Centres (SC) can be located. The availability of infrastructural facilities and the number of registered students are critical determining factors. The RSD also assists SCs to provide strong student support services to facilitate the distance students' pursuit of an academic education as independent learners. The RSD is responsible for the administration and management of RCs and SCs.

Regional and Study Centres

IGNOU functions through a network of 16 RCs and 215 SCs located across the union and territories of India. Geography and location are some of the factors that are used to determine the location of RCs and SCs. Another key factor is the availability of resource personnel who can perform the duties of

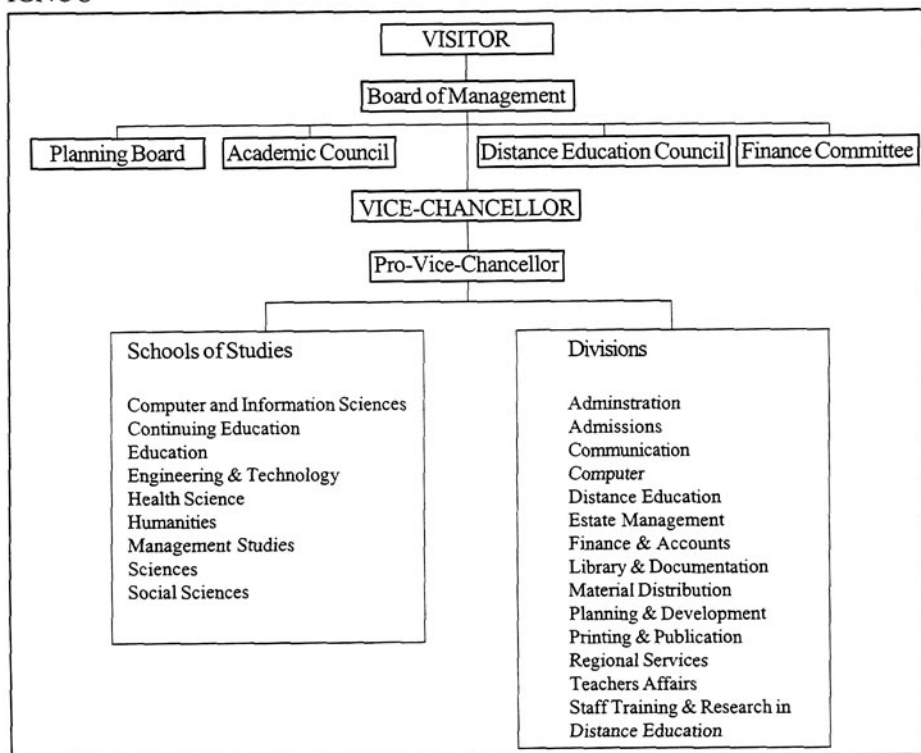


Table 1. IGNOU organizational chart

counsellors for the specific disciplines. Centres are located at existing universities, colleges and voluntary agency offices where possible. These are seen as good locations. In addition they are usually vacant on Sundays, holidays and on week-day evenings, which makes them available for distance teaching purposes.

Each SC has a coordinator, administrative staff and student counsellors. These persons are employed on a part-time basis.

The counsellors are experienced teachers who, as part-time employees, provide instructional support, guidance and counselling to students at the SCs. To facilitate the use of teaching materials, each SC is given a television, VCR and audio cassette player. A typewriter is also placed at each SC. The coordinators of the SCs organise counselling and contact sessions for their students. Counselling sessions enable students to seek guidance from a subject expert particularly to explain any area of incomprehension that the student may experience. The provision of counsellors is an attempt to reduce the separation that occurs in distance education between the teacher and the learner because of the absence of face-to-face teaching. Counselling sessions also enable students to gauge their academic progress. Assignments are submitted to counsellors

for evaluation, comment and guidance. Continuous assessment is therefore an important aspect of IGNOU's programmes. Thus SCs are IGNOU's principal point of contact with students and they are also responsible for the execution of the university's educational programme.

The functioning of SCs is coordinated and supervised by the RCs. RCs are also entrusted with the responsibility of disseminating information about IGNOU programmes and courses. The organisation of orientation and training programmes for coordinators and counsellors; monitoring the conduct of the academic programmes at the SC; the submission of assignments, their evaluation and the communication of grades to the Evaluation Division in New Delhi are also responsibilities of RCs.

In an effort to decentralise its operations, from 1990—91 all new admissions to IGNOU were handled at the RCs. From 1992—93 RCs were made responsible for the distribution of materials to students. Hence, the RCs link the SCs in their region with the RSD. In order to organise an effective and efficient student support services network, the RSD functions in close cooperation with the Admissions, Evaluation, Computer and Material Distribution Divisions, the Schools of Studies, Regional Directors (RD) and Coordinators of SCs. Similar links are established with the state governments, universities, colleges and institutions of higher education, *inter alia*.

IGNOU

Year	Number of New Students	Number of new Regional Centres	Number of new Study Centres
1986-87	4,361	4	27
1987-88	16,811	4	68
1988-89	42,324	4	25
1989-90	48,281	1	13
1990-92	52,376	3	37
1991-92	62,355	-	31
1992-93	75,666	-	14

Table 2. Data on new students and the growth of RCs and SCs 1986-87 – 1992-93.

Enrollment of students

IGNOU's enrollment figures have increased steadily from its inception. The number of new students in 1992-93 was 75,666 as compared with 1986-87 when the number of new students was 4,361. To keep pace with the rising student numbers, the number of RCs and SCs have been similarly increased. Table 2 provides data on student enrollment and the growth of regional and study centres from 1986-93.

LIBRARY SERVICE NEEDS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS

The library requirements of IGNOU students are varied. They possess diverse characteristics they belong to different socio-economic, cultural and educational groups and they come from a range of linguistic backgrounds. Thus they require information on many subject areas and at varying levels of complexity. Distance learners need to have access to library resources, either for onsite reference purposes or to borrow them for home study. The materials needed may either be in the home library or accessed through inter-library loans from other institutions.

The library service needs of IGNOU's students can be divided into the following three categories:

- materials and facilities;
- information services; and
- user services.

Materials and facilities

The range of materials and facilities needed include:

- reference books and textbooks;
- self-instructional materials and packages developed by various distance teaching institutions;
- audiovisual hardware and software including computers needed to access information stored in various formats;
- typewriters, word processors, photocopiers and other types of reprography equipment;
- lecture rooms or other spaces for learners to meet and use audiovisual materials; and
- library facilities for reading, storing and displaying materials to ensure quick and easy access to retrieve information.

Information sources

A range of sources needs to be tapped to respond to the information needs of IGNOU's staff and students. Library staff should be able to provide up-to-date bibliographic information about reference sources, books, journals and nonprint materials. These may be available within the IGNOU system or at any library on the sub-continent, which would then be supplied through inter-library loans. The types of sources that could be used for the satisfaction of information needs include:

- self-instructional materials, multimedia materials, educational programmes, radio broadcasts and television programmes; and
- any other organisation that provides education and training through distance and information on their courses.

Other information that could be required is the location of IGNOU's RCs and SCs, their contact and counselling programmes, summer schools, laboratory and library facilities, special lectures, available resources and facilities *inter alia*.

User services

Adult, independent learners need professional assistance and support from the library staff on:

- using the library collection;
- using equipment and facilities available in the library;
- providing guidance on the suitability of materials to support their courses;
- assistance in planning their learning; and
- developing and using study skills for independent learning.

To provide the necessary access to the information required, it is essential to have a well-trained library staff to collect, process, organise, store and disseminate information to users. Library staff must have the necessary tools to provide the up-to-date information that academic and administrative staff need for teaching, research and materials production. They must also provide library services to support the learning needs of students as well as professional guidance and support in all aspects of information literacy and use.

In order to satisfy the library and information requirements of the staff and students of IGNOU, the library staff should be willing to provide user education and information literacy training. Librarians have to develop the skills to provide such training and education. Communication with library patrons is an important facet of distance library services. Library services and holdings can be publicised through newsletters, posters, notices, guides, face-to-face contact or through the development and production of nonprint materials.

To provide the very diverse range of library and information services at IGNOU, one of the major academic support units is the Library and Documentation Division.

Library and Documentation Division of IGNOU (LDD)

The role of a library within an academic institution is guided by the institution's philosophy. 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; and to
- provide opportunities for higher education to all sectors of the society whether they live in urban, rural, remote, backward or hilly areas.

In order to satisfy the broad philosophy of IGNOU a summary of the objectives of the LDD is as follows:

- to develop collections of information materials to satisfy the general and special needs of staff and students at IGNOU's Headquarters, RCs and SCs;
- to provide reading, lending, reference, information and documentation services and facilities to staff and students;
- to provide documents and comprehensive reference information services in areas related to distance education to other open universities, especially to those in India.

The attainment of these objectives is not easy as IGNOU is hampered by several constraints such as the lack of adequate space, staff and finance.

Network of libraries at IGNOU

The library network of IGNOU is a three-tiered structure. The sections are:

- The Library and Documentation Division, i.e., Central/Main Library at Headquarters
- Libraries at the RCs
- Libraries at the SCs

The Central Library combines the features and functions of both an academic and a special library. This dual responsibility increases the complexity of library management policies for collection development and providing services.

Collection development for the network of libraries at IGNOU

To ensure consistency and standardisation in technical services, acquisition activities and collection development is centralised at the Central Library. The number of copies acquired depends on the number of sites that have students for a particular course. Course requirements and availability of materials are the main factors used in the selection process. Suggested titles for reading are also acquired for the libraries of the system.

Responsibility for the selection of library materials is shared between the professional librarians and academic staff. Print and nonprint titles needed to facilitate the production of course materials are also purchased. In addition, the Central Library has a useful collection of materials on distance education as a discipline.

Selection sources include visits to major book shops, book fairs and exhibitions as well as the perusal of sample copies sent by publishers and booksellers. Additionally, academic staff are sent, from the library copies of publishers' announcements, catalogues and pre-publication jackets. Subject specific bibliographies derived from printed and electronic selection tools are also drawn to the attention of academic staff.

In addition to supporting academic library patrons with traditional user profiles, other users are course writers, translators and editors, producers and media consultants, professional, technical and administrative staff all of whom are important in course development and the delivery of distance education. Libraries at the RCs support the work of IGNOU at that level. The resources of these collections are also made available to academicians and researchers who are able to go to these collections and consult their materials. The principal users of the collections at SCs are counsellors and students.

Library and information services to the users of the Central Library

The nature of a distance learning institution dictates that its libraries will perform traditional and non-traditional services. At the Central Library the following routine services are provided:

- reading services;
- lending services;
- inter-library loan services;
- user services;
- reference and information services;
- reprographic services;
- spiral binding services; and
- lamination services.

Specialised services in the field of distance education for staff at the Main Campus, RCs and SCs are served by the special collection of distance education materials that is located at the Central Library. This special collection is also used by students registered for postgraduate diplomas and master's degrees in distance education. Also using this collection are staff at state open universities, correspondence directorates and other interested users who require information about distance education and open university systems. The resources of this special collection are augmented by:

- newspaper clippings;
- indexing services;
- bibliographic services; and
- documentation services.

The Central Library is also required to maintain an archive collection of newspaper clippings and articles on all aspects of distance education in India. RC and SC coordinators contribute to this resource base by sending items of significance that appear in their local newspapers and other state publications. Thus, clippings, journal articles, information brochures and other desiderata from a wide variety of sources are available. Photographs taken at IGNOU and of IGNOU activities at any location are also actively collected and stored at the Central Library.

There is a great demand from faculty to provide additional specialised services. These include:

- abstracting services;
- current awareness services;
- selective dissemination of information;
- micrographic services; and
- facilities for viewing and listening to audiovisual materials.

The widening of the specialised service base will become feasible when the collection is relocated to the new library which is currently being constructed. The new library will provide the space needed by the collection which has expanded considerably from when it was begun as well as providing for projected collection growth. The new building will enable the library to have an integrated collection as there will be ample accommodation for both print and nonprint formats. At present the audiovisual collection is housed in the Communications Division, which is some distance away from the Central Library.

Problems faced by the Central Library

The library is presently housed in a temporary building. In order for the library to gain maximum use from this space, internal partitions have been erected. Work areas have been created in the first half. The remainder of the hall is used for stacks, circulation desk, periodicals display, reading room, reference section and free-standing catalogue cabinets. Furniture is used to demarcate the specific spaces.

At IGNOU, the lack of space hampers the availability of facilities such as carrels and small sound-proofed spaces for individual and small group work. The library also suffers from poor lighting as well as inadequate heating and cooling services. The new purpose-built building, when completed, should correct many of these problems.

The library budget is inadequate to purchase all the materials needed by staff and students. In addition, the prices of materials are increasing and therefore the ability of the budget to meet demands is shrinking. Another type of financial constraint is created by the literature explosion – with more and more books and other formats of information storage becoming available, the library's collection development efforts are unable to keep pace with the output of material.

The self-instructional course materials sent to undergraduate and certificate programme students seek to provide all the information that they will require to complete their course successfully. Thus for these student access to a well-developed library, though ideal, is not as critical. Nevertheless the library recognises that access to a wide range of materials enhances a student's learning programme. Additionally, restricted access to a well-developed library retards the development of information literacy skills.

On the other hand IGNOU postgraduate degree and diploma programmes are so structured that students are required to use library facilities. Some of these programmes require either a dissertation, project report or a practical component, all of which demand the extensive use of a well-stocked library. Books and articles listed as "suggested reading" at the end of each unit/block work need to be consulted so that students can complete their assignments and prepare for their final examinations.

Because India is a multilingual country, collection development is hampered by another complication. Students in the different states expect the library to supply course materials in their regional language. While this is possible for some titles, publications in engineering, science, technology, computer science and other specialised disciplines are not readily available in many languages. The cost to produce titles in multiple indigenous languages is prohibitive. It is also time consuming.

Another factor affecting the functioning of this library is an inadequate level of staff. The small team of committed and dedicated staff is hard pressed to satisfy user demands. As book stocks, journal subscriptions, university staff, services and other activities expand every year, the library staff is stretched to execute routine functions regularly and systematically. As a result, library staff are unable to function effectively and efficiently. IGNOU's authorities are both aware and convinced of the need for more staff. A Norms Committee has been constituted to suggest guidelines for the recruitment of professional semi-professional, technical and administrative library staff.

Library and information services to the users of the RCs and SCs

The patron profiles of RCs and SCs library users vary considerably from those of persons who use the Central Library. Appropriate library and information services are as vital to distance learners as they are to their peers in conventional universities. At present the RCs and SCs of IGNOU provide the following services to their distance learners:

- reading services;
- reference and information services;
- listening to audio materials; and
- viewing visual materials.

These services are available when a centre is opened to students for counselling sessions or contact programmes, during the evenings and on holidays.

The RCs are well-equipped with modern electronic and communication equipment to enable them to be in contact with headquarters. These include telephone, cable, telex, fax and E-mail. Television sets, VCR players and audio cassette players facilitate onsite access to information presented in these formats. Photocopiers and computers are also available at each RC.

Each SC has a TV set, a VCR and audio cassette player. In addition to its library, each SC also has a copy of all course materials, reference books and audiovisual materials produced by IGNOU as well as reference books for any course that a particular SC facilitates.

The ultimate goal of the university is to have a photocopier in every SC. This service is considered to be necessary given the expanding role of the SCs, student needs and administrative requirements. At present, only 16 SCs have photocopiers. Factors taken into consideration for locating these units were location, ease of access to other photocopiers in the area and the size of the student body at the SC. The availability of photocopiers will enable students to copy limited or scarce data for their personal use.

Computers are placed in SCs which offer the Diploma in Computers for Office Management and the Bachelor's Degree in Library and Information Science (BLIS) courses. The CDS/ISIS - 2.3 software package with a manual is provided at all 35 centres which have students in the BLIS course. Successful completion of the "Computer applications in libraries" is one of the requirements of the BLIS programme. Hence the availability of a computer at the SCs with the appropriate software is mandatory.

In spite of pressing demands from students, IGNOU is not able to offer user services on a full-time basis at these centres. This is because the facilities are available only on a part-time basis, and staffing levels are low owing to financial constraints.

SURVEY CONDUCTED TO REALISE THE REQUIREMENTS OF LIBRARY USERS

In order to ascertain from users their perception of, and needs and problems with, the library services at IGNOU a user survey was conducted in 1992/3. Specific information was sought in the following areas:

- adequacy of space for reading room and stack areas;
- convenience of seating arrangements;
- adequacy and usefulness of the collection, technical processing, organisation, display, storing and retrieval of materials and information;
- adequacy of staff, their attitude towards users and quality of user services;
- adequacy of the scope, range and depth of the collection;
- adequacy of the range of formats collected;
- usefulness of computerisation of library operations in information storage, retrieval and dissemination from the Central Library;
- adequacy of services provided by the Central Library to meet the requirements and expectations of staff at Headquarters, RCs and SCs. Identification of problems with these services as well as suggestions on improvements were also invited from these persons on the services of the Central Library.

Data collection

Questionnaires and interviews were the two data collection methods used. Individual questionnaires were devised for the following groups:

- Academic staff;
- Directors of Regional Services;
- Coordinators of SCs; and
- Counsellors and students attached to the SCs.

To expedite the receipt of responses some of the questionnaires were distributed and collected manually from 25 academic staff who are regular users of the Central Library. Most of these faculty members also visit the RCs every year to participate in the orientation programmes for coordinators of new SCs and the counsellors of the programmes offered at these Centres. Thus, their inputs were deemed to be reliable sources of information on the facilities available at the libraries of the SCs. Further, their suggestions for the improvement of library services to distance learners would be based on personal experience and observation. Table 3 provides information in the distribution pattern of the survey instrument as well the response rate.

The questionnaire for RDs, coordinators, counsellors and students were sent to all RDs. They were requested to make enough copies for distribution in their region. Each RD was to poll at least five coordinators, 10 counsellors and 20 students of various programmes. This polling procedure was adopted because it provided the best way to:

- get information from a broad-based group of persons who are associated with IGNOU programmes;
- get information from all states and union territories;
- receive prompt replies; and
- have a representative and judicious sample.

IGNOU Library Survey

Category of User	Questionnaires Distributed	Responses Received	Response Percentage
Academic Staff	25	22	88
Regional Directors	16	10	62.5
Coordinators	80	54	67.5
Counsellors	160	96	60
Students	320	208	65

Table 3. Distribution of and return data on survey instrument

Personal interviews were conducted with the Director of the Regional Services Division and the Head of the Library and Documentation Division. These interviews sought to gather their views and opinions on the expectations of all users of the IGNOU library system. In addition, there were expected to provide their perspective on the problems faced by IGNOU's authorities, the Librarian, RDs and Coordinators with regard to accessing library services. Suggestions for improving the system were also elicited.

Data analysis and interpretation

Analysis of the data received revealed the following major concerns:

- shortage of space
- insufficient staffing; and
- an inadequate collection.

Libraries are growing organisms, therefore problems such as shortage of space, imbalances in library staff/user ratios and the inability to service new and expanding demands occur from time-to-time in many academic libraries. Given the very fluid nature of distance teaching institutions, the significance of these difficulties assume added weight. Ultimately these factors impacted on the quality of library services available from such institutions.

Specific analysis revealed that:

- 82% of the staff found the collection inadequate, although 67% of them agreed that books that they had recommended had been acquired by the library. Two main factors accounted for this negative perception. Most of the books recommended by the staff had a pre-1980 publication date. Therefore many were no longer in print. Secondly, orders of titles for new and/or forthcoming courses were still pending and therefore they were not available for circulation.
- 74% of the staff surveyed reported that the library was well organised and that the books and journals were easy to locate. They also found that the system used to display these materials met their needs. Ninety-one percent reported that they could not locate books or journals on their own.

One of the difficulties in open access systems is that books are frequently mis-shelved by users when they are browsing the stacks. The lack of adequate staff prevents shelf rectification on a regular basis.

- 96% of the staff reported favourably on the willingness of the library staff to assist them in locating materials, responding to reference queries and providing information services. However, the unanimous perception was that the staff was too small to provide the level of user service needed and particularly to respond instantaneously to help readers with specific problems. Most respondents felt that the staff helped them to the best of their ability but that a qualitative improvement was needed, and that the only solution was additional staff.
- 85% of the staff found that the user services areas were not comfortable. Cited were inadequate lighting and that climatic control equipment should be installed given the extremes in the weather in New Delhi. Efforts are being made to make the environment of the library more suitable for serious reading and associated activities.
- 64% of the staff wanted all new additions to stock displayed prominently.
- 33% of the staff wanted cabins or carrels for individual work. Most of the issues related to inconvenience by the faculty will be redressed and addressed when the library moves into its purpose-built facility.
- 87% of the staff felt that the maintenance of the library was detrimentally affected by the lack of adequate administrative and professional library staff. Included in these concerns were the backlog of materials to be processed; catalogue maintenance; shelving; shelf-reading and the need to improve reference and information services. The appointment of additional staff was seen as the only solution to these issues.
- 72% of the staff required additional specialised services such as current awareness; selective dissemination of information; indexing and abstracting; bibliography service and personal access to online computerised databases and catalogues.
- 45% of the staff wanted to be able to listen to and view nonprint materials at the Central Library.

Other suggestions included an increased budget to purchase books, newspapers, reference sources, subject bibliographies, CD-ROM databases and other formats used to store information. Also requested was that the number of borrowers' tickets issued to patrons be increased from 10 to 20.

Some of these demands are not unreasonable and library staff are aware of the problems and limitations. Corrective measures to reduce the known limitations as well as the introduction of new and expanded services will be implemented after the new building is occupied.

The analysis of the responses received from the RDs, coordinators of SCs, counsellors and students to the questionnaire revealed that in relation to collection development and non-print materials:

- 87% of them reported that the collections were adequate but under-utilised as lending privileges were not available.
- 78% of the students wanted to have more Hindi and regional language books for reference.
- 67% of the coordinators suggested that more copies of textbooks should be supplied so that students and counsellors could have borrowing privileges.
- 58% of the coordinators suggested that all IGNOU course materials and audiovisual programmes should be placed at their Centres even if those courses were not a part of their centres' programming.
- 67% of the RDs and coordinators felt that journals for postgraduate programmes and on distance education should be available.
- 75% of the centres reported that they received the general publications of IGNOU, e.g. brochures, journals and newsletters regularly and they were displayed in a prominent place in the Centres.

Concerning the organisation of books and audiovisual materials the following information was submitted:

- 87% of the RCs and SCs have books arranged by subject on the shelves to facilitate easy location.

- 100% of all RCs and SCs have sets of examinations papers of previous years. These are filed according to programme for easy access.
- 100% of the RCs and SCs use the programme/course/discipline system to file their audiovisual materials on shelves. This facilitated easy retrieval.

With respect to infrastructural facilities such as space, furniture, equipment, staff and funds at the RCs and SCs the following responses were received:

- 67% of them reported that they did not have sufficient space for stacks, reading room and display purposes.
- 40% needed more shelving and book cases for storage and display.
- 83% indicated that they did not have proper spaces for listening and/or viewing audiovisual materials.
- 98% of the audiovisual equipment was working (at the time of the survey).
- 100% of the RCs had photocopiers.
- 90% of the SCs did not have photocopiers.
- 81% of the RCs have a semi-professional library staff member who manages these libraries.
- 72% of the SCs indicated that they wanted a part-time semi-professional staff member to manage their library.
- 58% of the RDs and coordinators stated that they required more funds for the acquisition of books, journals, magazines and newspapers for the centres.

When asked to identify areas of need, the following data emerged:

- 100% of the RDs, coordinators of SCs, counsellors and students requested that procedures be adopted to allow the issuing of books, course materials and audiovisual programmes for home study. Some respondents recommended that security deposits be levied and fines be imposed when books and audiovisual materials are returned past their due date.
- 85% of the administrators and students suggested that the libraries of the RCs and SCs should be open every day of the week, including holidays. Also requested were longer hours of opening so that students could make the maximum use of library facilities.

The principal problems cited were:

- 30% of the centres had acute space problems. Lacking were sufficient shelves to store the existing collection. Also needed was sufficient space for shelves. Inadequate space affects the functioning of libraries.
- 80% of the administrators and users of the library have requested additional catalogue cabinets. They have also requested timely dispatches of catalogue cards for books received. This will enable users to access the collections more easily. Staff shortages at the Central Library account for the delay in the production and supply of catalogue cards.

Also emerging from the survey were views on the role of the RCs and SCs within the IGNOU organisation generally and on its library and information services in particular.

A number of persons indicated that a more permanent arrangement should be made to house the library collections of the RCs properly. Effective steps should also be taken to have permanent library staff appointed so that the collection could be built up and used to better advantage. The institution of borrowing privileges was also requested.

It was also felt that all RCs and SCs should be supplied with all audiovisual materials that are produced by IGNOU. Some respondents felt that these programmes should be loaned for limited periods.

The majority of respondents at SCs wanted improved library facilities at these sites. They wanted not only reference services but also borrowing privileges. This has two major cost implications, particularly given the large number of SCs. Materials for reference collections are usually more expensive than general titles. Secondly, establishing a lending library is a very costly exercise. Undoubtedly proper library and information services are important factors in independent learning. At the same time the institutional cost is high. This raises the issue of community resources and how these, especially the public libraries, can support distance education and other forms of independent learning.

THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC AND SPECIAL LIBRARIES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Libraries in many colleges in India exist in name only. The few well-organised college libraries find it difficult to meet the needs of their own students. Thus they are not in a position to render assistance – even in a limited way – to distance learners.

University libraries are well-equipped and organised through the benefaction of the University Grants Committee. However, these libraries are located in large cities. Consequently, the ease of access to library services that urban students enjoy is not replicated in the experience of rural and remote students.

Specialised collections are of limited value to undergraduate students. These collections are useful to postgraduate and diploma students who are pursuing programmes in the particular disciplines served by such collections. Inter-library loan arrangements with other universities and special libraries are established by IGNOU so that these resources are available to its postgraduate students and academic staff.

In September 1991, a committee was appointed by IGNOU to consider the guidelines for opening IGNOU Book Corners (IBCs) at a number of traditional universities and other educational institutions around the country. The purposes of the IBCs are to popularise IGNOU's aims and objectives; to explain the educational methodology used for this form of education and to make readily available IGNOU's teaching materials for general use by the learning community in the country. The host institution would need to provide sufficient space and furniture at an easily accessible place for the IBC so that IGNOU course materials, general publications, journals, newsletters, bulletins, information brochures, leaflets and other materials could be displayed in a systematic, attractive and organised manner. As a result of these arrangements IGNOU would have at its disposal a system that facilitates, with ease, the widespread dissemination of its materials that are for sale or free distribution. A 50% rebate could be offered on the items that are available for sale.

ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

The concept of public libraries, as traditionally understood in India, is to provide library services for education, enrichment and recreation. The existence and development of Indian public libraries depend on a library cess (fee) levied on the public as a part of their property taxes. Hence, it is obligatory for libraries to serve all citizens including independent learners. There is precedence for this approach to provide library services to distance learners. Students at the (British) Open University at Milton Keynes and Sukhothai Thammathart Open University in Bangkok, Thailand get their library support principally from the well-established and highly developed public library systems in their countries.

In India, the level of services given by the public libraries to distance learners of the correspondence institutions and open university could be greatly improved. A positive step would be the enactment of appropriate legislation making it mandatory for the public library to provide library services to distance learners. At present only eight states viz Tamil Nadu (1948), Andhra Pradesh (1960), Karantake (1965), Maharashtra (1967), West Bengal (1979) Manipur (1988), Kerala and Harayana (1989) have library legislation. Though legislation has not been enacted in the remaining states, most of them already have well-established functioning public library systems. The enactment of library legislation and the harmonization of these laws would create a functional public library system in all States and Union Territories of India, enabling them to play a key role in supporting distance education.

A well-established public library system would form the basis of a system providing services to persons regardless of where they lived. The existence of a well-resourced public library system in each state is a necessary precursor to a national network of public libraries. Such a network would form the basis of intra-state and inter-state linkages which would be of great assistance to distance learners, whatever the level of their programme.

The nature of the assistance that public libraries can and could give to students of non-conventional programmes and courses is directly dependent on the level of information that these institutions give to the public library systems about their courses and the information needs that students will require to support their learning. Regular dispatch of up-to-date information on their institution, activities and courses would enable the public library to better serve their students.

In order to fulfill this enormous task, public libraries must have suitable infrastructural facilities such as adequate space, professional, trained, experienced and motivated staff and an organised user-orientated collection, *inter alia*. This is possible if the Central and State Governments provide adequate grants.

Another requirement is a well-coordinated and on-going dialogue between all of the parties involved in the use of public libraries to support distance education. This group must include the RDs of IGNOU, authorities of State Open Universities, the Director of the Public Library System and the Librarian of the State Central Library. A healthy relationship between the coordinators of IGNOU's SCs and the librarian of public libraries in every city, town and village is vital if such collaborative effort is to make a meaningful difference.

The establishment of "Library corners for distance learners" (LCDL) in public libraries is seen as a useful development. Prior to establishing LCDLs, RDs and state library officials must ensure that the necessary infrastructural facilities are available in the public libraries to be used. The institution of LCDLs should be done on an incremental basis so that state governments can have sufficient lead time to make the necessary arrangements. This would also enable IGNOU to develop LCDLs on a gradual basis rather than to institute them *en bloc*. This will facilitate the evaluation and improvement of services in a timely manner and without undue strain.

To institute a comprehensive trans-national library service to support distance learning the model below is proposed. The objectives of the model are to:

- increase the number of RCs and SCs within the IGNOU system;
- increase the number of library and information service points within the IGNOU system;
- improve the quality of library and information services that are available to the staff and students of IGNOU; and to
- improve IGNOU's delivery of library and information services.

The recommended timeframe for the institution of the model in any locality is six years, with a new phase being introduced every two years.

FUNCTIONAL MODEL FOR LIBRARY FACILITIES TO DISTANCE LEARNERS

Phase I

IGNOU should negotiate with state governments and institutions that host RCs to provide suitable accommodation for an IGNOU Resource Centres (IRC) for its distance learners. As more than 70% of IGNOU's students are from urban areas, it will be possible to render services to a large segment of students by establishing IRCs at the 16 RCs.

For students who live in rural, remote, hilly and backward areas, IGNOU has already established SCs. To augment the extremely limited resources in these areas, IGNOU on an incremental basis should request the authorities at SCs where there are more than 500 students to upgrade their infrastructural facilities. In addition, 15 new SCs should be established in different parts of the country in non-urban localities. The enrollment at these SCs may not be large but the library needs of these students cannot be satisfied by any other channel.

The strengthening of resources and facilities at all SCs and RCs will be conducted through all phases of this model.

Phase II

During this phase, authorities of SCs which have more than 3,000 students should be requested to improve and enhance the infrastructural facilities at their sites thus, upgrading them to become IRCs. In addition, 10 new SCs should be located in rural, remote and hilly areas.

**A Proposed Functional Model
for Library Services to Distance Learners in India**

National Level

New Units	Sponsoring Agencies
Library Corners for Distance Learners	Central and State Governments Public Libraries
IGNOU Book Corners	University Grants Commission Universities Other educational institutions
Mobile Library Units for Rural, Remote, Hilly and Backward Areas	IGNOU in association with other cooperating institutions

Institutional Level – New Developments

PHASE I 16 additional RCs	10 SCs in rural, remote and hilly areas
PHASE II SCs with over 3000 students to be upgraded to IRCs	10 SCs in rural, remote and hilly areas
PHASE III SCs with over 2000 students to be upgraded to IRCs	10 SCs in rural, remote and hilly areas

Phase III

During this phase, IGNOU's SCs with more than 2,000 students should be upgraded to IRCs. Additionally 10 new SCs should be established in rural, remote and hilly areas.

Optional feature

Recommended as an optional feature of this model is the introduction of Mobile Library Units (MLUs) which would be used to transport core collections to students who are very remote and for whom the establishment of IRCs would be unrealistic. The collections for the MLUs would be developed by the Central Library after consultations with the coordinators of the relevant SCs.

The MLUs should be phased in gradually. The development of MLUs is in consonance with recent developments in the Indian philosophy of distance education where mobile training squads and mobile study centres are seen to be integral aspects of the delivery strategies that will be used.

This approach seeks to provide library services to an ever-widening pool of IGNOU students – regardless of where they live. The RCs and SCs should be well-equipped, organised and user-orientated in terms of collection, amenities and staffing. Multiple copies of textbooks recommended as “suggested reading” should be supplied for each course/programme so that borrowing privileges can be extended to students.

In order to reduce the financial burden on the institution, IGNOU distance learners could be charged one or a combination of any of the following:

- an annual membership fee;
- a deposit for accessing the lending services;
- a fine for overdue materials; and/or
- the replacement cost for a lost or damaged book.

The monies collected from these sources could be used to improve resources generally, or those at the specific site at which they were collected.

CONCLUSION

The spread of distance education throughout India demands that the issue of library services to distance learners be given systematic consideration. Given its national status it behoves IGNOU and its LDD to place this matter high on their development and planning agendas. The construction of new library facilities is a positive step in this regard. Another is the solution of the problems identified in the 1992/3 survey, so that user access will be improved in all areas. Including into the system the recommendations and suggestions of all the groups polled would be desirable. The implementation of recommendations that affect a large cross section of users would immediately improve the level of library services available to IGNOU’s distance educators and students.

The integration of all tertiary-level institutions into the provision of information services for all learners at this level is vital. The role of the University Grants Committee and the Association of Indian Universities in this matter cannot be minimised.

Public libraries can and must have a role in the provision of library services to distance learners. There is an urgent need for devising a National Policy for Library Services to Distance Learners. Maximising the use of all of the resources available is demanded. Conflicting demands and needs will arise. Compromise is necessary and possible. What cannot continue is an absence of access to information, no matter who needs it or for whatever the learning purpose.