

LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION: THE IGNOU EXPERIENCE¹

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education has grown phenomenally over the last 10 to 15 years. In addition, distance education has become so integrated into standard education systems that when thinking of how education can be imparted one is longer restricted to thinking of traditional face-to-face contact only (Keegan, 1986). The theory of distance education has become a highly developed and complex discipline in its own right. Holmberg's (1986) *Growth and structure of distance education* draws attention to some of the important theorists of distance education. The work of these theories is also discussed in *Distance education: international perspectives* (Sewart, Keegan and Holmberg, 1983). A question that has concerned these researchers is whether distance education is merely a vehicle of distribution or a system of education in its own right, worthy and capable of description and analysis. Their contributions make it clear that despite the fact that distance education is a methodology (i.e., a practical process) it is important and necessary for its protagonists to examine background theoretical issues.

Sewart, Keegan and Holmberg (1983) express the need for theories on the discipline of distance education when they recommend that a firmly based distance education will be one which can provide the touchstone against which political, financial, educational and social decisions can be taken with confidence. This would replace *ad hoc* applications which would occur if distance education is used as a problem-solving approach to a crisis situation. Sewart, Keegan and Holmberg's recommendation is sound and pragmatic, thus it deserves consideration whenever distance education course is being created and established. This view also demonstrates convincingly why theory is not an optional extra but a necessary activity whenever any discussion about distance education occurs.

An important issue within the discipline that needs standardisation is the terminology and meaning of the term distance education. Keegan (1986) devotes an entire chapter to this question in his book *The foundations of distance education*. Faibisoff (1987) examines this question in the first article of an issue of the *Journal of education for library and information science*. Zingerell's (1984) definition that *distance education is a form of instruction characterised by the physical separation of teacher from student, except for the occasional face-to-face meeting allowed for by some projects* is accepted by many and covers the major differences between distance and conventional education. Zingerell further points out that distance education differs from correspondence education in that it pre-supposes opportunities for student interaction, whether live or mediated, as well as student independence. Also provided by Zingerell is a distinction between distance education and distance learning, the former being the process whereas the latter focusses on the receiving of distance education.

¹ IGNOU is the international acronym for the Indira Gandhi National Open University in New Delhi, India.

Faibisoff's (1987) article extracts from the many definitions the following four common characteristics which are the essential qualities of distance education. They are that distance education:

- provides occasional interaction with faculty;
- provides for student independence and individual study;
- is delivered through courses both on- and off-campus; and
- is based on student needs.

Highlighted as being even more pertinent is the important implication that distance requires students to accept responsibility for being successful in their programme of study and that they should not depend on the presence of an authoritarian professional educator.

The pros and cons of choosing distance education are reported on by many authors. The Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education (ACACE) (1983) in *Distance learning and adult students: a review of recent developments in the public sector* offers rationales for and against the use of distance learning. From the students' perspective, ACACE suggests that a positive aspect of distance education is that it frees them from being tied to a fixed schedule to attend an institution; it does not require their traveling to and from the institution of instruction; and it frees them from the emotional and intellectual dependence on a teacher and also from peer pressure. Suggested as negative factors are the lack of verbal and non-verbal teacher cues which assist in the assimilation and understanding of new ideas and skills; the lack of stimuli and reinforcement from teachers and other students and also that distance education materials may be too rigid thus prohibiting the creation of critical independence; and the limited access to resources and facilities which can be to the disadvantage of distance learners.

Having placed distance education in context this article describes the experience of delivering library and information science programmes through distance education by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).

LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE EDUCATION IN INDIA

Library science education has been available in India for more than 50 years. During this period, library science education has moved from the traditional mix of on-the-job training and part-time courses conducted and examined by professional associations to bachelor's and master's degree programmes offered by universities and other institutions of higher education and learning. Some of the universities also offer Ph.D. programmes. A novel development occurred when the Andhra Pradesh Open University (APOU) now known as the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) began to offer library and information science at the bachelor's level via distance education.

The experiment was a great success. However, it was only available to persons who lived in that state of Andhra Pradesh. Persons who were employed in libraries throughout the country demanded that they be given similar opportunities. As a result, IGNOU launched its bachelor's degree programme in library and information science. The justification for starting this programme was that the courses conducted by other universities are mostly full-time and therefore not accessible to a majority of employed people. In the initial stages IGNOU had to examine questions which related to whether disciplines such as library and information sciences, which are essentially practice-based, could be taught through distance methodologies. However, the success of similar programmes in Sri Lanka and Andhra Pradesh prompted IGNOU to launch its B.LI.Sc. programme in library and information science. The experience of the last five years in running this programme and the feedback given from those who have successfully completed it confirms that this development was a good one. It has also contributed to the popularisation of distance education in India.

BACHELOR'S DEGREE PROGRAMME IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE (B.LI.Sc.)

The aim of the B.LI.Sc. programme is to train professionals for middle level managerial and operational positions. People in these grades form the bulk of the manpower force usually found in different types of libraries. Areas covered by the B.LI.Sc. programme include skills development in operational routines, supervision and control of daily activities and a clear understanding of the basic role of libraries and information systems. The specific objectives of this programme are to:

- provide opportunities for professional development to those persons employed in libraries but who are not professionally qualified to hold technical positions. As a result they are either under-employed and/or unable to be promoted; and to
- develop professional standards in teaching practice-oriented technical subjects through the distance mode of education and thereby contribute to manpower development opportunities in library and information science in India.

Curriculum design

An expert committee was constituted by IGNOU to design a suitable curriculum for the B.LI.Sc. programme. The committee was comprised of professional library and information science educators as well as practising library managers and administrators.

The expert committee opined that the syllabi followed by most universities and other conventional trainers of professional librarians was somewhat heavily oriented towards traditional library skills such as cataloguing and classification. The general consensus of the committee was that this emphasis did not meet the growing need to have computer-based information-handling skills such as information management which are needed to support the types of client-based services that many libraries are now offering. It was also felt that another deficiency in traditional programmes was the lack of exposure to marketing skills which many employers expected recent graduates to have. Recognising these views as important, the expert committee formulated the curriculum for the B.LI.Sc. programme. A determined effort was made to incorporate contemporary developments in the discipline in the design of the curriculum.

Programme structure

Nine courses constitute the B.LI.Sc. programme. Of these, seven are devoted to theoretical principles pertaining to different areas of the discipline, which two courses provide practical exposure to areas such as cataloguing and classification. The specific structure of the programme follows IGNOU's course design structure. This ensures uniformity in administrative arrangements. The terms adopted by IGNOU for its course structure are programme, course, block and unit. At IGNOU each term has a specific meaning, e.g., unit is always the lowest self-contained component of a programme. The following is a list of the theoretical areas covered by the programme:

- Library and society
- Library management
- Library classification
- Library cataloguing
- Bibliography and reference work
- Information services and organisation
- Computer basics and applications

Cataloguing and classification are covered in practical courses. The practical components of the computer basics and applications course are integrated into the theoretical course, and work experience with computers will be provided through demonstrations of software packages such as CDS/ISIS.

Course teams and preparation of course materials

The (British) Open University adopted the innovative “course team” approach to the development of distance education courses. This model has been followed by many distance education institutions throughout the world. IGNOU also uses this approach for all of its programmes. Each course has its own course team which is led by a course coordinator who is responsible for course development. Also contributing to the development of a course are the course writers of the different units, editors and print and nonprint production personnel.

Many distance education institutions adopt a multi-media approach to deliver courses relying on a suitable mix of appropriate communication technologies for instruction. In the case of IGNOU, each programme consists of a number of courses and each course has several blocks of printed material and a number of audio cassettes and videotapes. All of this material is combined to form learning packages for IGNOU’s B.LI.Sc. programme to which many eminent scholars and capable educators in the profession have contributed.

Good technology-based instructional courses and programmes are the result of the combination and cooperation of many persons with a range of talents. The formation of good distance education teams depends not only on academic contributions but also on the input of many others skills including course writers, graphic designers and media personnel such as directors of audio and video programmes, the services of computer laboratories and animation studios. To support these needs IGNOU has developed the capacity to provide these services.

Admission requirements

To be admitted to the B.LI.Sc. degree the candidate:

- must be a graduate of any recognised university; and
- should be employed in a library and should possess at least two years’ experience.

The time allotted to complete a B.LI.Sc. degree is a minimum of one year and a maximum of four years.

Programme delivery

Several IGNOU divisions are involved in the delivery of the B.LI.Sc. programme:

- The Printing and Production Division (PPD). This division is responsible for the production of all print materials associated with the course. These include course materials, programme and admission guides and the different types of assignments (e.g., computer marked assignments (CMAs) and tutor marked assignments (TMAs)).
- The Communications Division. This division, in collaboration with faculty members, is responsible for the production of audio and video programmes. This division is staffed by qualified and trained personnel.
- The Materials Distribution Division (MDD). This division has the task of distributing the course materials according to the dispatch schedule suggested by the faculty.
- The Regional Services Division (RSD). This division appoints counsellors (on the advice and recommendation of the faculty) for the different areas of the discipline and also implements the delivery of the B.LI.Sc. programme. The RSD functions through a network of regional centres and study centres.

Each IGNOU programme is offered at a fixed number of study centres spread across the country. The B.LI.Sc. programme is offered at 30 SCs. The SCs are located in organisations which have the resources required to support the delivery of the B.LI.Sc. programme. IGNOU’s policy is to optimise its access to all local resources as well as to avoid unnecessary duplication. Course counsellors are chosen, wherever possible, from expertise that is locally available. Each SC has a coordinator who monitors all aspects of the implementation of the course and who interacts with students through the SC counsellors. Students’ performance reports are sent to IGNOU headquarters in New Delhi by the SC coordinator. Counselling sessions and face-to-face interaction between students and counsellors is awarded with 10%

of the credit time allocated to a course. The counselling sessions are conducted at each SC. Students are given prior notice of these activities. The audio and video programmes associated with the learning packages are telecast on the national television network three days a week. Each SC is equipped with a TV, VCR and audio cassette player. Students are allowed to view the video programmes at the SC to which they are attached. The SCs also provide limited library facilities to students.

Evaluation and examination

Student evaluation and examination

Student performance is evaluated and examined in two ways. The first is through the marking of assignments. This course has one CMA and two TMAs. These assignments are the continuous assessment aspect of the course. The second evaluation component is the completion of an answer script which is submitted at the end of the terminal (annual) examination. The final grade is determined on the following basis: 30% for continuous assessment and 70% for the terminal examination. Two marking schemes are used – grades and numerical. The grading system is divided as follows:

- A Excellent
- B Very good
- C Good
- D Satisfactory
- E Unsatisfactory

The numerical scale is out of a possible 100. To qualify for a degree, a student has to obtain a minimum grade of D in each course with an overall average of C. In the numerical system a minimum of 35% in each course and an overall average of 40% is required. Candidates receiving between 40% and 49% are awarded a Pass Degree. Candidates obtaining marks between 50% and 59% and 60% and over will be awarded 2nd and 1st Class degrees respectively.

Programme evaluation

The B.LI.Sc. programme has been offered since 1989. Mullick and Mullick (1994) conducted a tracer study of B.LI.Sc. graduates of IGNOU. The objectives of the study were to investigate the quality of the programme with respect to the following issues:

- design (syllabus and curriculum);
- study materials;
- delivery of study materials;
- student support services;
- continuous assessment; and the
- terminal examination.

The study also attempted to identify any problems related to the recognition of this degree by other universities. It also solicited, from those who had been successful, suggestions on ways that the programme could be improved.

The findings were interesting and encouraging. The majority of respondents indicated that the course was a very useful one and that it should be continued by the university. Some useful suggestions on how the course could be improved were given.

THE M.LI.Sc. DEGREE AT IGNOU

Presently 44 universities in India offer a master's degree in library and information science. As each university accepts only about 25 students each year, the overall intake is between 800 and 900 students annually. This number of places does not match the number of students who wish to pursue library and information science studies at this level. In addition, several manpower studies have suggested that there is a need for higher level trained manpower in libraries. The central and several state governments have

prescribed that a master's degree is a requisite qualification for appointment at senior levels in libraries. In addition, the University Grants Commission has stated that for posts at the level of Professional Assistant and above in universities the minimum qualification required is a master's.

Recognising that there could be a market for a master's degree programme in library and information science, IGNOU decided to explore the feasibility of offering this degree. Several reasons contributed to IGNOU's decision to offer a master's in library and information science. Among the reasons were that

- a master's was necessary for certain appointments in libraries, especially in universities;
- the fact that admission to the established courses was difficult;
- the fact that many persons who wished to take this degree were already employed and that their employers were reluctant to grant the necessary leave to them to study on a full-time basis; and
- the experience and expertise acquired from running the B.L.I.Sc. were strong motivators in the development of a master's degree programme in library and information science at a distance.

Objectives and scope

Master's degree level training prepares persons to hold higher level managerial positions and be able to contribute to the prestige of the profession, its reputation and individuals. Persons with training at this level would be able to provide professional leadership, plan activities and programmes for information institutions and execute them and monitor their operations. Training at this level would provide exposure to a range of user needs and requirements, enabling them to design and develop innovative user services. At an individual level, training at the master's level would contribute to professional development.

The M.L.I.Sc. programme consists of eight courses, six of which are core courses covering information areas, the management of library and information centres and information technology. There are two electives designed to impart specialised skills whether in particular libraries or selected areas of the discipline.

Curriculum design

A team approach was also used for the development of the curriculum and course of the M.L.I.Sc. programme. The expert committee contended that libraries were not the only information institutions that offered information services. There were many new types of information institutions that offered information services and that such institutions were growing. Nevertheless several of the techniques and models that were developed for traditional libraries were useful in these situations with or without modification.

It was also recognised that not only was the information itself as a commodity important, but also important were the systems and services that store, disseminate and use information. After the necessary deliberations the following curriculum was developed.

Core courses

MLIS – 01	Information, communication and society
MLIS – 02	Information sources, systems and programmes
MLIS – 03	Information processing and retrieval
MLIS – 05	Information institutions, services and products
MLIS – 04	Management of library and information centres
MLIS – 06	Application of information technology

Electives

MLIS – E1	Presentation and conservation of library materials
MLIS – E2	Research methodology
MLIS – E3	Academic libraries
MLIS – E4	Technical writing

Although candidates are only required to choose two electives, it was felt that several elective courses should be developed to provide as wide a range of choice as possible. It was also felt that by having several electives, new areas and topics could be incorporated into the programme without having to make significant changes in the curriculum.

Admission requirements

The admission criteria for this course is a B.LI.Sc. degree from a recognised university or any other equivalent qualification (e.g., PG Diploma in Library Science from a recognised university). Preference will be given to persons who are already employed in library and information units.

Other aspects of the programme such as course development, programme implementation, programme delivery, evaluation and examinations would be based on the norms developed for the B.LI.Sc. programme.

At the time of writing the course is in the planning and development stage and the first students are yet to be admitted. After a suitable period this course will also be evaluated.

CONCLUSION

Although distance education is a new development in the educational system of India, its potential to provide expanded educational opportunities is recognised by educators and the government. It is also believed that distance education will help to reduce the inequalities that exist in the education system in the country.

IGNOU has a mandate to plan and organise distance education in India. Therefore it has been engaged in providing educational opportunities at distance in many disciplines including library and information science. Distance education is different from conventional classroom teaching in many ways including how it uses modern communications technologies to support education. A proper mix of all media – print, audio, video and other electronic formats – improves the quality of distance education. Distance education also requires more organisation, more advanced planning and significantly more preparation time. Teachers need to be involved in the design, development and delivery of course materials as well as in counselling students. Teachers need to cooperate with other professionals who can contribute to the development of course materials as well as the efficient delivery of course materials. The success of any distance education systems depends on several factors.

Distance education has been viewed with some suspicion because it is different from conventional education. However, as distance education systems develop and expand this situation has been changing. Recognition of the potential of this system of education is growing, and therefore every effort must be made to ensure its success.