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Open Univerity Sri Lanka Library System, Services and its Future Plans

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Introduction

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), established in 1980, introduced distance education using an integrated multimedia approach, incorporating structured self-study, tutorial support and guidance. The resulting package enabled learners to work at their own pace. The OUSL offered courses at certificate, diploma, degree and postgraduate levels.

With the literacy rate at over 90 per cent in Sri Lanka, it could be surmised that the OUSL was established for those who could not enter the traditional institutions of higher education as they were employed. The establishment of the OUSL thus offered an opportunity to those who wished to upgrade their education on a part-time basis.

Today, the OUSL has a main campus where the major resources of the library are concentrated. There are still only four Regional Centres, but the nine original Study Centres have now increased to sixteen, covering the greater part of the country. They basically aim to link the campus and the distant learner. The OUSL library thus faces the challenge of finding ways and means to provide students with the skills to use information resources, international databases and virtual libraries. Given the location of both distance learners and information resources, this is a challenge.

Virtual classrooms and virtual libraries are complementary necessities of distance learning. The delivery systems for distance education have evolved from print media to telecommunication and electronic media. Information is delivered to distance learners through interactive video via communication satellites, and through electronic mail, electronic bulletin boards, tele-conferencing and online databases. Korale (1996) remarked that:

All this means of funding for library services should be adequately provided, either by the university itself or through cost-sharing arrangements ... If co-operative networking exists and compatible systems are in place, students will have access to other library catalogues as well.

OUSL programmes and student enrollment

There are three faculties, with eight programmes in Engineering, ten in Science and twenty-five in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

In Engineering, the Diploma in Electronic Engineering is in greatest demand, as there is a demand for Information Technology professionals, in the country. Computer awareness programmes have done a service for students to be computer literate, to meet the current needs in society. The science degrees have always been popular. We are the pioneers to offer a degree in Nursing in Sri Lanka. In the HSS (Humanities and Social Sciences), the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) is very popular, because the graduate teachers need a diploma for their career development. Even in the regions, apart from the basic and advanced English courses, there is a demand for the PGDE.

Admissions to the Management Diploma and the Law degree courses are highly competitive, and there is an entrance level exam for these courses. The degree course in Social Science has been picking up. The HSS faculty have paved way to offer degree courses in Management and English.

There are about 18,000 students, of whom 10,000 have registered in the central campus, and more than 50 percent of them are below 25. This is because, ours being a small island, many students are within reach of the central campus, and school leavers also find it a means to further their educational advancement, whether employed or not.

Library collection and library facilities

The library is open 7 days a week from 9.a.m. to 7 p.m. except on special holidays, which occur 7 or 8 days in a year. The Audio-Visual Centre of the library, located within, also offers viewing facilities to students. Reference facilities are available to all students, and lending facilities to students from level 3 and above. Photocopying of library materials is also available at nominal rate.

The books are generally located in the central campus. Multiple copies of all course materials, books as well as audio-visuals are available in the Regional and Study Centres. The departments have identified a few textbooks as core books for each course. These core books are duplicated and are sent to the Regional and Study Centres, where necessary, as instructed by the divisional heads. Periodically, the past question papers, model papers and answers are also sent to the Regions and Study Centres. The departments also select books for teaching and reference purpose through their book allocation. The library utilises its own vote, for general reading, IT and special needs of the faculties and students.

Present collection

Main Campus - Library

The CampusLibrary has 58,000 textbooks, 4,288 reference books, 1,142 bound journals, 336 pamphlets, 102 CD-ROMs, 656 audios and 817 videos.

Centres

The Regional and Study Centres have 25.921 books, 146 journals and 47 locally acquired books.

Strengthening collection

A good collection of up-to-date Science and Technology books has been purchased through an ADB (Asian Development Bank) loan, and core books and other useful books have been duplicated at the Regions and Study Centres, where necessary. The UNESCO and World Bank projects supported, in for improving book collection in courses dealing with Education.

Problems pertaining to library materials and students' views

The ability to find what they want is better among the present generation of students, even though their reading habits are poor. They select what they want and get them photocopied. However, the demand for library materials among students in descending order is, course materials first, past question papers, core books, text books and finally audio-visuals.

Since most students have poor language ability in English, they either tend to limit their reading to the recommended books or their course materials. So there is always a demand for the core books. But generally there are not many duplicated copies of the core books. They have to be multiplied at the centres. This paucity can be remedied by further photocopying services.

- The user survey shows that about 50 per cent of the students depend on course materials and wish that the course materials should include all what is needed, including extracts from reference materials that are convenient for them to do their studies, without the bother of travelling to the study centres, often situated far away.
- 25 per cent of them prefer better photocopying facilities. They wish to have the relevant pages from the reference materials photocopied and made available as handouts, rather than their coming, searching and photocopying. But the Librarian holds the view that the students should be able to search for themselves at least from a given number of reference materials, and select what they want, so as to broaden their understanding of the subject, and improve their reading, as adults.
- 25 per cent of them feel that the number of copies of the core books available is not adequate, even though the lending facilities are available and core books are duplicated, as everyone would want to borrow the same books. These books may not be available sometimes, even for photocopying. Due to assignment deadlines, it is not feasible to reserve and await books. Today, time and information are considered as resources or commodities, and students are frustrated when they cannot find what they want. They also feel, that the fine is a barrier for many students to make use of the offer to borrow books. However the Library management views, that the fine is necessary to make the students return the books in time, as duplication of core books need to be carefully thought out, so as to strike a balance between the demand and constraints from funds available.
- Generally there are requests to make copies of cases in Law and of past papers.

In some cases, the regional centres are far from their residence, in the range of 50 km or above, and they are not able to go and do reference. Students feel that the communication between the staff is not always easy, so they prefer face-to-face classes, conducted in the regions. Unlike the students in the west, in developing countries students are shy to communicate and ask from the library staff or lecturers all what they really want.

- The use of other libraries, even for reference, is dependent on goodwill rather than on a formalised scheme. The provision of reference facilities to external users is still not a regular part of library services in Sri Lanka.
- Document supply, in general, takes longer, and the students are not confident that they would receive them in time, as we cannot rely on the postal system in our country. Facilities are not adequate in the regions, for making queries through e-mail, as in the main cities. However, even for students to go to the centre, to make their requests and get the necessary documents delivered to them, remains time consuming. The same is true for ILL requests, and hence they try to depend on the course materials.
- A few keen students feel that not enough periodicals are available. This is because the journals are costly and more money is spent on developing the book collection.

The recent past

Widened customer services

- Even though the students were allowed to refer books since the 1980s, during the last few years we have afforded lending facilities, after a deposit of Rs. 500/- for each book the student is allowed for a fortnight at a time, and a fine is imposed, in order to encourage the users to return the books in time. The students are given a maximum of two tickets.
- The In-House Statistics show that the usage of books has improved after lending facilities were offered to students.

Earlier, it was the course materials and past papers that were in great demand. But after the lending facility was given we have recorded an increase in the use of the core books and other text books. Other subject-related materials are being equally used, particularly in subjects like Computer Science, Engineering, Mathematics, Chemistry, Law, Management, Botany & Zoology. There is a notable demand for the computer- related books.

Videos are popular among the students. Students do look at the videos that are part of their course materials or accompanying materials, which are freely available at the centres. But there are not enough videos developed locally, suitable for the Engineering and Science students that would facilitate their study. Some of the OU-UK videos are available that would facilitate the students' awareness of the subjects.

Library promotion

- Library Brochure giving the library hours and services, is given to students. Also available at the counter.
- Guided tour to the library as part of the orientation programme, when each new batch is enrolled.
- Staff generally tries to answer any queries, either through e-mail, telephone or by post, without much delay.

- A video had been developed to keep the users informed about the library services. Another video deals with the Library OPAC CDS/ISIS software.
- Staff assistance in doing searches on OPAC, as and when needed.
- Free Internet access and access to the campus-wide LAN (Local Area Network).

Present scenario

LAN

- There is a campus-wide LAN, which connects all the departments, establishments and the administration since 1998. This paved the way for us to provide access to bibliographic information campus-wide, on WINISIS.
- This year the library purchased ALICE, an integrated Library Management System, from Softlink, South Asia, which will help the users not only to access the bibliographic data, but also the circulation information and to making reservations through LAN, as well as through Internet.

Internet

- Even outsiders can access the library bibliographic databases through INTERNET (Inter-related Networks or a Network of Networks).
- With the main campus the students are given free Internet access, for subject search, as a reference tool.

CD-ROM databases

The library subscribes for the electronic database, for ERIC, in CD-ROM format, which has been used by the staff as well as students, but only in the main campus.

Minding the communication gap

Hathaway (1999) notes that: 'The 'Gap' is the black hole between the tasks demand by the students curriculum and the provision of resources and services in the library/learning resource centres.... The lecturers and librarians failed to communicate concerning curriculum changes, and this led to students demanding resources that were not in stock". In addition, whatsoever measures are taken, it takes longer time to acquire books published abroad, than expected.

With a decrease in class contact time, and an increase in student - centered resource based learning, the student is expected to spend a higher proportion of time learning with resources. Even though the Distance Learning takes a lot of the 'student centered teaching and learning support', the reality in the developing countries is that the infrastructure is not adequate for the use of Information Technology, particularly in the regions. In order to promote their making use of these limited facilities, the students should be better trained to use library facilities available for distance learners.

It is worth mentioning here that demand for document delivery is not significant enough to make

improvement. This is partly because the students do not know about the facilities in the library, and their right to demand for them. Some user education has to be promoted among the students, if necessary in a compulsory manner as some of the universities in the West are doing. They should be educated to search for material within the library, or through Internet, from the additional references given in the department's web-sites, and to communicate with the course co-ordinators.

Hathaway (1999) writes, regarding developments in Information skills at Reading university, ...' The aim of the course is to help students achieve facility in their scientific writing and to become familiar with the use of information technology."

The course is a collaborative venture between library staff and academic colleagues to:

* reflect as closely as possible the different routes of access to information that students are likely to employ in a subject search;
* allow self-paced learning;
* increase attractiveness of the material to students;
* maintain choice between electronic media and paper formats;
* help the library staff to have better links and understanding about the curriculum, academic and the students at various level, in various parts of the country, to be responsive and serve them better.

University IT policy and library services

Main campus

IT Policy had been drawn to provide better access to students in using the computers and the number of hours a student should be given at different level

Developing the regions

a) by providing access to library bibliographic database, Island-wide.

b) Improving ILL, within OU (Regions & Study Centres)

The regions have to further the following facilities

Increasing internet access points

With the help of an organisation, interested in promoting distance learning, we intend providing many more Internet access points, for the benefit of students in the regions, as well as in the main campus. As a first step the regional centres will be given the LAN connection.

Lecturers contribution

In order to encourage the students to read outside their course materials, the lecturers are planning to provide news clips and information about relevant topics in support of the course contents available in the Internet, and extracts from particular books. These will be included in the lecturers

web-page, in the Universitiy's web site. This is to provide Internet facilities, by giving them access to the University web site where the lecturers have additional notes clips, or guidance to improve their studies.

Factors preventing from improvement of services

* Poor reading habits
* Not many subject-oriented books are available in Sinhalese or Tamil, and poor students have no command of English.
* Lack of time for the Staff to do research or for students to do extra reading.
* ILL is not properly organised to share resources.
* Not all the academic and special libraries have OPAC, with a web-inquiry to the OPAC

Future activities / objectives

Our five year co-operate plan includes the following :

* User Survey, at different levels.
* Liaison with course teams to discuss the changes in presentation and how we should guide the students
* Develop a video on doing searches with the newly installed Library Management Software, ALICE for Windows (AFW).
* Provide face-to-face user training at residential schools, wherever feasible.
* Improving User Service by providing SDI (Selective Dissemination of Information) Service, Document Supply
* ILL, among the University as well as the Regional and Study Centres
* Widening Resource Access and Document Supply by:
    i) Having an Intranet linking all the academic and special libraries and Educational Institutions, so as to strengthen resource sharing within Sri Lanka.
    ii) More access points to Internet and to the LAN in the main campus and regions.
    iii) Scanning contents pages of journals and having them on the web, giving information of the availability of the articles from each library within the library co-operation scheme.
    iv) Photocopying and delivering other user requests through e-mail or post.
    v) Keeping the Library Bulletin Board lively, providing more information on user education and useful subject related web-sites as reference tools and improving current awareness services.
* Establishing links between Open Universities in the Asian region to share resources and to mutually access databases.

Conclusion

The OUSL as a whole, has acquired considerable experience in promoting Distance Education and has plan to further this concept, both in the area of coverage as well as depth of learning. The use of IT plays a key role in facilitating this. Even the library's present five year co-operate plan hope to have a greater distribution of students and facilities in the regions.

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