

Chapter 9

Library Support to Distance Learners: Case of a University's Distance Library Services in India

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The chapter discusses library support services in a distance education system and their value and importance in the overall development of a learner in general and a distance learner in particular. The chapter also traces how emerging digital technologies allow libraries to offer efficient support services to distance learners. This case of Distance Library Services at a university in India describes the evolution, experiences and challenges of offering distance library services through the university. The chapter focuses on information literacy and use of social networking tools. Development of information literacy is critical for distance learners, and social networking tools based on Web 2.0 technologies may provide library services and impart information literacy to distance learners. The chapter concludes with some suggestions pertaining to opportunities and future propositions.

INTRODUCTION

Modern day learning experience has come a long way beyond pedagogical instructions and face-to-face interaction. As globalization advances, education is increasingly crossing borders of regions and nations. Educational systems have to now respond to other profound changes, such as the knowledge explosion, the changing interac-

tion between the public and private spheres etc. Universities have also to respond to quantitative changes, including a massive overall increase in intake everywhere. The demands of the learners are also changing. With the continuing explosion of knowledge and the breaking down of the old fixed patterns of employment, learners are increasingly demanding a type of education that allows them to update their knowledge whenever necessary and to go on doing so throughout their working lives. All of these developments are closely intertwined

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with the most striking development of all, which is the phenomenal growth of information and communication technologies. These are having a profound effect at all levels of education, including traditional university programmes; however, they arguably are noted to benefit the distance learners in particular.

In this chapter, the term ‘distance learners’ is being used to denote students enrolling themselves into either distance education or off-campus programmes. Most distance learners face time, mobility and financial constraints because of their career and family circumstances. Given the right computer technology, they can give themselves maximum benefit of flexible learning. Generally, most major distance education universities operate a mixture of the synchronous and asynchronous modalities for broadcasting or disseminating their programmes to their students. Students who are enrolled in distance education programmes often are unable to come to the campus or off-campus location for the administrative, student, and academic services they need. Institutions offering full programmes via distance education need to provide the full range of services at times and in ways that are convenient for these students. These services include admissions and registration, enrollment advising, academic advising, financial aid, career counseling, library resources, self-learning materials ordering etc. Advances in technology have had a significant impact on the way that institutions provide services, particularly administrative and library services, to all of their students. This has helped to narrow the differences in the way distance learners and on-campus learners are served. Yet, it does not always result in distance learners receiving a full range of services.

WHAT MAKES DISTANCE LIBRARY SERVICES VALUABLE?

Several professional bodies like the Indian Library Association (ILA), American Library Association

(ALA), Association of College and Research Libraries under ALA, Commonwealth of Learning (COL) etc., have clearly spelt out standards and guidelines for offering distance library services. Owing to the quantum leap in online and distance learning systems and institutions, globally the body of literature on distance library services is also observed to be increasing rapidly. But what makes distance library services valuable? Distance Education (DE) or Distance Learning (DL) or Online & Distance Learning (ODL) or be it any name such as education through correspondence or even e-learning, the very obvious fact is that the teacher and the taught are physically separated by means of time and space; and this calls for sound support in terms of supplementary materials for a fruitful learning experience to take place. This very fact itself makes distance or off-campus library services valuable.

- **Collapsing boundaries:** Even though distance education has a long and diverse history, dating back to 1840, in the last ten-to-fifteen years it has been completely transformed by the emergence of web-based technology. Over the last decade, an increasing number of academic institutions have built satellite campuses and developed online courses to meet the needs of distance learners. As these academic institutions have expanded, demand for library service has increased significantly. It also infers that today’s increasingly e-learning culture collapses the boundaries between regular on-site students and off-campus, external programme students (i.e., distance learners). Hence any kind of library service extended as a part of distance library service using emerging digital media also benefits the on-campus students. For example, the COL Topical Guide on Developing Library and Information Services for Distance Education (Watson, 2003) mentions the most important distance library service

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