Responding to the Library Needs of Distance Learners

MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE FOR SCIENCE, EDUCATION AND CULTURE, COBISS 2009

Maribor, Slovenia, 11 November 2009

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Abstract

One of the current trends in higher education is the rapid growth of distance education. Until recently distance learners could not access the rich documentary resources available to campus students, a factor thought to undermine the quality of distance education. However, the Internet has changed that. The paper examines how distance teaching universities make library resources available and how their students use them. There will be a particular focus on the challenge of serving distance learners in developing countries since that is where much of the growth of distance education will be.

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here and to make my first visit to Slovenia. I express special thanks to my former UNESCO colleague, Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, for suggesting my name.

One of the major trends in higher education is the development of distance education, both within countries and across borders. My own organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning, specialises in advising governments and institutions on distance learning in particular and use of technology in education in general. Although we are funded by Commonwealth governments and only work directly in Commonwealth countries, the information, advice and materials that we generate has a global reach and is freely available worldwide. We work closely with organisations that share our goals, such as UNESCO.

I am delighted to be here with you to address the topic: Responding to the Library Needs of Distance Learners. This is a most appropriate forum to address this theme. I am most impressed by what I have learned about COBISS and congratulate you on the infrastructure that you are setting up. Because it is a trans-national integrated computer-supported library information system, COBISS is extremely relevant to my remarks today, and is just the sort of system that helps distance learners and students on campus to have equivalent access to library services.
My plan is to begin by putting distance learning in context before moving on to the specific issue of library services. Distance learning at university level is not new, but it has expanded and diversified so much in recent years that it is easy to be confused about its essential nature.

I shall make the distinction between institutions that operate exclusively through distance teaching – often called open universities – and what we call in the jargon dual-mode universities. These are institutions that teach both on campus and at a distance. Today that includes most universities, because very few universities have not attempted to introduce some form of distance teaching – with greater or lesser success.

Once I have set the stage I shall look at the provision of library services from both the students’ and the faculty’s perspectives, bearing in mind the distinction between open universities and dual-mode universities that I have just made.

**Distance Education: the Essentials**

The term distance education applies to forms of education where a student follows a course of study leading to a qualification but has little or no face-to-face contact with the teachers in the institution offering the course. This means that various forms of communications technology have to be used to bridge the gap between the institution and the student. The history of distance learning is the history of the evolution of the technologies that today offer a wide range of communications options for students and institutions.

We should see the evolution of technology as a cumulative process. Each new communications technology adds to the richness of the environment rather than replacing previous developments, just as aeroplanes have not put an end to trains and cars have not eliminated bicycles or walking as ways of getting around.

The earliest form of distance education was by correspondence. I like to trace that back to St. Paul’s epistles to the young churches of the 1st century, but correspondence education really took off in the 19th century when countries began to introduce universal postal services. Since then we have had a succession of technologies: radio, film, television, computers, DVDs, the Internet, and all the social communications media like FaceBook and YouTube that so engage people today.

But before we focus on particular technologies let us reflect on the essential nature of technology. The advantage of using technology is that it enables us to extend our reach and to do things better and more cheaply.

In the 18th century the economist Adam Smith, in his famous book The Wealth of Nations, described how making pins in factories, rather than by hand, allowed much larger volumes of pins of consistent quality to be produced at a fraction of the cost of having individual artisans make them by hand.

Adam Smith identified the four essential principles of technology that drove the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries and continue to define how most of us work today. Those principles are
division of labour, specialisation, economies of scale, and the use of machines and communications media.

Technology and Education

The question is, can technology have the same impact on education that it has had on the manufacturing of products and the offering of other services. In my work in intergovernmental organisations I have met many ministers of education. They tell me that the essential challenge they face is to pursue three goals simultaneously. They want to widen access so that education and training can be available to all citizens that aspire to it. Second, that education must be of good quality. Third, the cost must be as low as possible so more people can take advantage of it.

So governments seek three outcomes from their education systems:

- Access: to be as wide as possible
- Quality: to be as high as possible
- Cost: to be as low as possible

Expressing this as a triangle of vectors makes the challenge clear. With traditional methods of face-to-face teaching this is an iron triangle. You want to stretch the triangle like this to give greater access, higher quality and lower costs. But you can’t! Try extending access by packing more students into each classroom and you will be accused of damaging quality. Try improving quality with better learning resources and the cost will go up. Try cutting costs and you will endanger both access and quality.

This iron triangle has hindered the expansion of education throughout history. It has created in the public mind – and probably in your own thinking – an insidious link between quality and exclusivity. This link still drives the admission policies of many universities, which define their quality by the people they exclude.

The Technological Revolution

The good news is that technology can transform the iron triangle into a flexible triangle. By using technology you can achieve wider access, higher quality and lower cost all at the same time. This is a revolution – it has never happened before. This is what educational technology can achieve if used properly. This is why more and more countries, especially in the developing world, are creating distance education systems to operate at scale.

An example: The UK Open University

Let me give an example that I know well: the UK Open University. I was the rector of that university during the 1990s but I shall cite recent figures for access, quality and cost. With 220,000 students in award-bearing programmes the UKOU has clearly expanded access. Furthermore this is not just in the UK since 60,000 of its students are overseas. Then there are a million students around the world taking UKOU courses embedded within local awards. Many of these courses derive from the Open Educational Resources on the UKOU’s OpenLearn website. I shall come back to those.
I expect that you will be more surprised by the UKOU’s performance in national comparative assessments of teaching quality. This table dates from 2004, the last year when this type of assessment was conducted. However, as I note at the bottom of the slide, the UK government now conducts national surveys of student satisfaction with a very large sample of students and the Open University has come top three years running. Finally, the last time costs were compared the cost per graduate of the UKOU was 60-80% that of conventional universities depending on the subject.

So the Open University has achieved the technological revolution of wider access, higher quality and lower cost. It has stretched the iron triangle. How has this been achieved?

It has been done through the combination of Adam Smith’s technological principles. In the category ‘Machines and ICTs’ the UKOU offers a multi-media system of distance learning with strong student support. This multi-media system includes some of the world’s largest deployments of eLearning but the key issue is not the eLearning or any of the other media, but the focus on division of labour, specialisation and economies of scale. You could say that the UKOU divides the teaching and learning process into its constituent parts, gets different people to specialise in doing each part as well as possible and then puts it all back together again into an integrated system.

The UK Open University, and the many other open universities around the world, operates exclusively through distance learning. However, a much larger number of universities – including, no doubt, some represented here, are now offering distance learning alongside their classroom courses on campus. These are what we call dual-mode institutions. How do they apply the principles of technology?

Dual-mode institutions

First, although dual-mode institutions do not have the same opportunities for economies of scale as open universities, they should aim to attract significant numbers. Investing in distance learning materials costs money and it makes sense to amortise those cost over as many students as possible. That is why some dual-mode institutions pick highly specialised subjects in which they have a national or international reputation and offer graduate programmes in those subjects. Examples might be Powder Metallurgy or Forensic Psychology. Since there will be few comparable offerings they can aspire to a worldwide audience.

At the other end of the spectrum universities often prepare distance learning versions of large enrolment courses in the first year of the undergraduate programme, particularly those that many students find difficult and retake several times, such as Statistics.

When they introduce dual-mode teaching universities often think that each academic can handle both distance and on-campus students and therefore they don’t need to bother with division of labour and specialisation. The move to using eLearning has reinforced this view.

Experience shows, however, that what Professor Tony Bates calls the ‘Lone Ranger’ approach to distance or eLearning is short-sighted. If it wishes to make distance learning sustainable a university has to divide up tasks and have people specialise in doing them.

The key functions of distance education
Three key functions in distance education are:

• Administration and Logistics (e.g. student registration, despatch of course materials);
• Course development (preparing learning materials in various formats);
• Student support.

The university will already have systems for registering students, but it will not have a system for sending out course materials. But it makes sense to do this centrally rather than expecting academics to do it.

Course development might seem a task that individual academics can do by themselves. However, with ICTs playing an increasing role in teaching – even in the classroom – it does not make sense for each faculty member to acquire all the skills need, specialist help should be available. The evidence from distance learning indicates that courses developed by teams of academics, rather than by individuals, are of higher quality than those developed by ‘lone rangers’.

Finally, student support is an area that demands division of labour. Tutoring and supporting distance learners is best seen as a specialised function that can be carried out better by specially trained tutors, often working part-time, than by the faculty who developed the course. Such division of labour is clearly essential when student numbers in a course become too large for an individual instructor to cope with.

Library Services

Library services are a vital element of student support and I shall devote the rest of this talk to them. Until the Internet came along providing library services to distance learners was a challenge that institutions approached in essentially two ways: making courses self-contained and mailing books to students.

When the UK Open University was set up the first rector, Walter Perry, told his staff to design their courses for a lighthouse keeper off the coast. Such a person received mail or visited the mainland only rarely, so the course package had to include everything necessary for the course.

By comparison the University of South Africa, UNISA, another large open university, kept dozens of copies of key course reference books in its library and mailed them out to students on demand. The return rate of books by students was very high, but such a process took time.

Ethical issues

Today there are many other alternatives, but before I explore them I want to refer to a paper on Ethical issues in providing library services to distance learners by Gill Needham of the UK Open University and Kay Johnson of Athabasca University, a smaller open university in Canada where I also once worked. The paper begins with three examples of distance learners whose studies are hindered by poor library services. The authors then developed a list of institutions’ responsibilities to distance learners in providing library services, starting from their professional codes of ethics as librarians and any guidelines they could find. Their list contains ten items of which I cite five:

- institutions must take responsibility for providing library support to their own distance learners;
- distance learners must have access to equivalent levels of library services and support as students on campus;

- distance learners may need library services that are more personalised than those for on campus students;

- defend intellectual freedom and avoid bias; and

- respect the integrity of information and intellectual property.

These are a demanding set of principles. The first stresses that it is not ethical simply to refer students to other libraries, even if the student’s university has agreements with them. Students may live a long way from any library and, in any case not all libraries will have the specialised collections necessary to support advanced courses. Academics should discuss the library support needs for the courses they are developing at an early stage so that a support plan can be worked out.

This is the home page of the UK Open University library. You can see that it refers students to videos about how to use the library and also offers online tutorials in how to use the library. Right at the bottom you can see that some resources are available to people who are not registered students. Here is the home for the Athabasca University library with a list of the services that it offers.

The second principle, of equivalency of service, is even more demanding even though equivalent must not be taken to mean identical. However, networked technology has made things much easier. Indeed, changes in student profiles, with more part-time and employed students taking courses on campus, mean that all students are accessing more library services and resources online. One area of difference is that distance learners are less likely to receive explicit instruction in how to use a library. Librarians should work with faculty to build in some exercises in library use for distance learners, who are even more in need of training in how to use online resources than regular students.

Let me digress for a moment here to say that faculty who are teaching at a distance need help from librarians just as much as students. Although academics will generate much original material for their courses they will also cite and use third-party material. Librarians have an important role in helping them find appropriate material, especially pictures and multi-media material, and ensuring that the institution has appropriate permissions to use the material when it is under copyright.

Open Educational Resources

Librarians should also be ready to help faculty deal with the new world of Open Educational Resources. These materials, which are usually in digital formats and freely available for adaptation and use, will become a tremendous asset for universities embarking on distance teaching. However, most faculty members do not have the skills of finding them and understanding the various versions of the Creative Commons licence that Open Educational Resources use. Librarians can be very helpful here.

Let me note that UNESCO and COL are working in partnership with some external funds to educate government officials and university leaders about the potential of OERs. In these days of tight budgets they can be an important element in making higher education more efficient and improving the quality of its teaching. We shall be focusing particularly on Africa because we are concerned that all parts of the

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word contribute to the creation of the global intellectual commons of which OERs can be such an important part.

The OER movement began in North America and Europe with major projects at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) that made the lecture notes of its faculty available and the UK Open University that made its self-learning material available. Although such was not the intention these origins have given the OER movement a somewhat neo-colonialist flavour in the eyes of the developing world. Our aim is that institutions in all parts of the world should produce OERs and all institutions should use OERs.

You are better equipped to produce good open multi-media resources on Slovenian history and culture than people in the rest of the world and, in return, you should be looking to Africa for resources on African music.

Returning to my short list of the obligations of university libraries to the next point was that distance learners may need library services that are more personalised than those for on-campus students. It is easier to point students to resources in a physical library than in an online environment. But some services can be both personalised and automated. For example, the UK Open University library, which has a staff of 90 serving its 200,000 distance learners, has a service called ROUTES (Resources for Open University Teachers and Students). This provides a set of useful resources for each subject area. These have been checked by the University staff for their relevance and are updated regularly. A newer service is MyOpenLibrary that personalises the service a bit more. In addition to ROUTES it gives students an online space that they can customise to meet their needs.

Item four, defend intellectual freedom and avoid bias sounds rather dramatic, but what this means is that libraries have to make choices in the development of their physical and online collections. It is reasonable for a library to focus on the needs of the university’s curriculum and research portfolio rather than trying to build up a balanced collection in all subject areas. To give another Open University example, since it does not teach in the areas of architecture and clinical medicine its collection is weak in those areas.

Finally, how does the library respect the integrity of information and intellectual property with distance learners? Needham & Johnson (2007:126) point out that this raises a host of issues in the areas of information literacy and computer ethics, such as netiquette, computer viruses, security of information, plagiarism, documentation styles, copyright, legal downloading, resource licenses, user authentication and information storage. It is not the role of librarians to policy their students but they should advise faculty and students about copyright in building course reserves and teach information ethics as a part of library instruction.

Dealing with plagiarism in an online environment is a particular challenge and librarians may need to make students aware of what plagiarism is and why it is wrong, inform them of institutional policies, and train them in how to evaluate and incorporated knowledge sources.

Baggaley & Spencer (2005) documented the case of a serial plagiarist at Athabasca University who built up a 200-megabyte database compiled from online sources that he incorporated into his course work without proper attribution.

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Conclusion

Let me conclude. Time has only allowed me to give the briefest of accounts of the challenge of providing library services to distance learners. I thought it useful to give you some background on how distance education works before addressing the specific challenge of library services.

One useful way of thinking about distance education is to reflect that on campus the instructor teaches whereas in distance education the institution teaches. In a similar way individual librarians serve students on campus whereas distance learners look to the library as a whole for service, which means that the library has to organise itself somewhat differently.

The examples that I have given from the UK Open University and Canada’s Athabasca University have shown you how two different-sized institutions are addressing the challenges. There is also a growing literature about library services for distance learners which the librarians among you will find it easy to track down.

References
