ODL Support Services through use of Innovation and Technology: A case study of Indira Gandhi National Open University Library

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Introduction

Libraries resources and services have been the most essential support systems influencing the quality of the courses offered in distance education. Most researchers in distance learning are in agreement that library support is a key element. (Copers et al., 2001). So Distance Education Libraries are the key to the academic strengths and are heart and soul of the learning process. It is correctly said that "the greatest obstacle to create a complex and comprehensive set of distributed learning offerings lies in meeting the information needs of students in an electronic medium'' which can be provided only by Libraries (Thompson, 2002).

Further with the modern technological advancement, Libraries have contributed to the success of the distance education. With the expansion of internet and web, the distance learning libraries has reached beyond the imaginations. With the support of technology based Libraries it has become possible to offer more subjects other than conventional courses in a cost effective way. The Libraries access is now offered globally with the quality of services with more relevant, timely, easily available, and up-to-date online information sources. (Gutierrez, 2010)

Indira Gandhi National Open University and its Library & Documentation Division (L&DD)

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), India with 28 years of golden existence has come up with largest Open University in terms of number of students. The University has continuously striven to build an inclusive knowledge society through its inclusive education. IGNOU was started initially with two academic programmes in 1987 with strength of 4,528 students. With its services and popularity across the globe now it is serving the educational aspirations of over 4 million students in India and 36 other countries and offering near to 490 programmes. The network of University comprises of 21 Schools of Studies, facilitated by 69 regional centres, 3,000 learner support centres and 67 overseas centres. (IGNOU, 2013a)

The IGNOU Library was established in 1986 is the most resourceful information centre in the country in the field of Distance Education. The Library known as Library and Documentation Division is having largest collection of books, journals and other related materials in the field of Distance Education, throughout the country. (IGNOU, 2013b) The primary mission of the IGNOU library is to support the educational and research programmes of the University by providing physical and intellectual access to information. In accordance with the objectives of the University, the library is moving forward with a dynamic future by adopting new technologies and resources to develop a comprehensive collection of educational reservoir, useful for the readers.

The growth of the IGNOU Library has been tremendous over the years. The number of collection has reached the landmark of 1.5 lakh books at central library and 2.5 lakh in Regional Central Libraries. Nearly 8000 physical books were added to the collection of Central Library for the academic year 2012-2013. The bibliographical details are available 24X7 anytime anywhere through IGNOU Library Website Webopac for both Central Library and Regional Centres. The IGNOU Library virtual services

provide library users with access to knowledge resources 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The library's services and technological advancements aren't confined to the four walls of its facilities.

Libraries and Distance Education

Librarians have always playing a key role in supporting distance learners, the development of advanced networks library professionals need to become technology experts, for making resources further developed, archived, annotated, distributed and managed (Wood and Walther, 2000).

According to Trevor Peare librarians have to reappraise the support that can be given to students who rarely appear on campus and when they do, it is often for concentrated sessions at week-ends. (Trevor, 2008)

The Distance Education Libraries need to provide adequate library services and resources equivalent to regular traditional campus setting for attainment of educational skills for distance learners, faculty and programs locations. The effective and efficient virtualized services must be offered to the distance students. The accessibility of services like online ready reference, electronic transmission of information, resources catalog searching, inter library loan facilities and many more will enhance the quality of distance programme. The role of library remains similar whether of the learner is physically at reference desk or virtually or remotely seeking a query.

It is correctly said that Information will continue to proliferate, end-users will continue to seek it, and the innovative library will be the one that best addresses the needs of its users" (Rockman, 1988).

IGNOU Library and Technology

The Library of IGNOU is continuously involved in development of better learning environments and methods suitable for the use of more appropriate information technology in Library to reach the unreached. Information technology and new communications options have leveled the ``playing field'' for distance students, allowing them to approach their studies with the assurance that they will receive equivalent library support services to that received by their classmates on-site. It is seen that information that once was available only in printed format is now available online through various databases. (Cooper, 2000)

So, due to this IGNOU Library has involved into a more complex models with a range of professional skills which are extended to include computer science and telecommunication expertise to reach its distance learners. Its services have also evolved over the last few years into more efficient and advanced models following the progress of the telecommunication, library networks, remote access, social networking, open access to e-resources, advanced data processing, and none the less applications of artificial intelligence in the system.

In addition to it the Library is providing e-resources from 60 prominent databases subscribed from the world class publishers with about 75000 e-journals and 1711 e-books in addition to a plethora of open access e-resources listed on IGNOU Library Website. The major e-resources range from Emerald, IEEE Xplore, JSTOR, EBSCO, Oxford, Cambridge, Springer, Sage, Wiley, Taylor and Francis and many more.

The IGNOU Central Library is providing Digital library for digital and electronic information sources, with the capabilities of movement of information across global networks and the effective use of this information by a wide range of its learner. It took the initiative to go beyond the traditional searches and mechanisms to describe information services by capability rather than by name. The L&DD took the initiative to perform content-based search and integrated various search engines and to ``mine'' data from heterogeneous collections. Ontologies were also provided to allow users to search for information using terms from domains. (Bargellini and Bordoni, 2001)

To promote its services IGNOU Library is also providing training through online tutorials to its learners for making them use of and familiarization with new technology systems implemented. For this intensive professional graphic, video, multimedia and programming support has been used. The Library is also using Web 2.0 tools to establish "subject blog", offer RSS subscription, IM robot consultation; using open source software to carry out setup storage construction; integrating system to establish a unified academic resources portal service platform

Major Library Services provided to Distance Learners are

- Online Reference Services;
- Access to E-Resources and Online Resources
- Bibliographic and informational services through Web OPACs
- Access to institutional repositories and Online Databases
- Question Paper Database Service
- Online Consultation services;
- Accessibility of non-print media and electronic resources
- Interlibrary loan services;
- Instructional programs
- Web-based tutorials
- M-Library Services (E-Content on Mobile gadgets)

As the users are at distance so the services need to provided are rapid and readily available to the distance learners.

Integrated Library Management System

Koha is the full-featured open source library management system that is widely used for efficiently managing libraries. For its regional and study centre Libraries IGNOU Central Library has implemented the KOHA LMS. It has migrated 2.5 Lakh books bibliographical details on a centralized system at IGNOU headquarters' library. This will help the IGNOU Library system to control its regional and study centers libraries and provide a centralized charging and discharging functions of the circulation section more effectively. In addition to this IGNOU Library is planning to use the Open Source Software to its full potentiality by using its features like centralized cataloguing, document manager, RSS feed of new acquisitions, its metadata and interoperability standards, Unicode complaint and much more. For the central library collection IGNOU Library is using Libsys Lirary Management software. The OPACs of the collection are available 24X7 online for access.

Remote Access to E-Resources (RATE Service)

The IGNOU Central Library has been successfully providing the Remote Access to E-resources services to all its users at Central Library and Regional Centres. This provides access to all the e-resources which were earlier available at the IGNOU Campus only on intranet through the RATE Service, are now provided outside the campus anywhere 24X7. All resources are provided to scholars who are accessing networked information resources and who are at locations remote from physical library. A virtual service was provided directly for information access and retrieval sessions, remotely assisting the user during the real-time, online process. The service has initiated at present with nearly 1200 username and password and is shortly starting for MBA and MCA programme students also.

One Stop Search to IGNOU Library Resources

A prominent feature of the IGNOU Library is the single stop search which is dedicated web portal of One Stop Search to IGNOU E-Resources. The IGNOU Library users and learners are provided with easy-to-use search tool which can be used to search IGNOU Library resources including e-books and e-journal, and e-databases. They can refine their search in many ways including Content Type (e-journal, e-articles, e-books), Subject Type, and Journal Name.


One Stop Search to E-Resources at IGNOU Library

A-to-Z Service

IGNOU Library is also providing most complete Web-based tool provided for organizing and providing links to all of IGNOU library's e-resources, including e-journals, titles in full-text databases and e-journal packages, and e-books. This service provides A-to-Z listing of IGNOU library's e-collection, with easy navigation to full-text content. The Integrated e-journal table of contents (TOC) browsing makes A-to-Z one-stop location for accessing subscribed e-journals.

Resource Sharing

IGNOU Library has signed the memorandum with Developing Library Network (DELNET) which is a network for promoting resource sharing among the libraries. It is connected to 4641 Libraries across India and 24 libraries across the globe having access to 1,62,59,492 union catalogue of books, 35,990 periodicals, 9,22,042 periodical articles and many more other databases. The IGNOU Central Library has connected its all the IGNOU Regional Centres across the country, to make the service more feasible or its users.

http://www.delnet.nic.in/   *http://164.100.247.17/index.html*
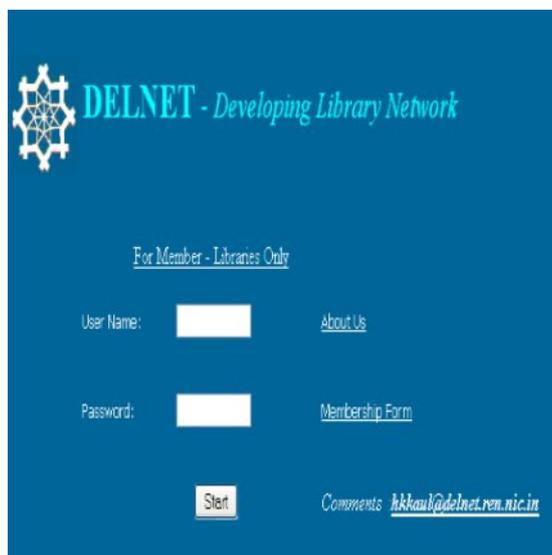
M-Libraries Services at IGNOU Library

The IGNOU Library is taking initiatives to provide m-library services like library collection OPAC, SMS alerts, library circulation, RSS feeds, m-Blogs, peer group interaction, reference librarian, access to repositories, specialized content including online databases, e-journals, e-books and other e-resources for its distance learners. (Chandhok and Babbar, 2011)

Institutional Repositories

IGNOU has its one of the largest repository of IGNOU Course material called as E-gyankosh which is a National Digital Repository to store, index, preserve, distribute and share the digital learning resources developed by the Open and Distance Learning Institutions in the country. At present the community has 40736 documents under it and 1700 under Pan Africa e-network. In addition to this IGNOU Library is in process to create new repositories on Photo Albums of IGNOU, special collection on distance education and faculty publications.

Openness

The primary goal of open universities is to provide educational opportunities and resources to all. With the growth of Open Course and Open Resources in the last few years has also started eliminate the barriers of distance, interactivity and cost. The new definition of Open Learning is to have new ideas and potential gains to the distance learners. (Perkins, 2011). With the availability of plenty of Open Web-based resources and metasearch engines, have harness the power of the Internet and have further revolutionized library services. They have permitted more electronic information to be placed into the direct hands of end-users than anyone previously imagined was possible. (Rockman, 1999). The IGNOU Library is providing a plethora of open access e-resources to its users

Some New Initiatives in Pipeline

- Course Reserves: IGNOU Library is setting Up a Service to Provide Full-Text Articles of Course Reading Materials for the IGNOU Learners. Course Reserve materials will be made available in print or electronically to distance learners and the faculty within IGNOU System on demand to support their teaching, learning, and research needs regardless of their place of location.
- Digital Repository on Dissertations and Theses: This institutional repository will capture, organize and disseminate research records of the university and act as a database for open access to such resources of the university. The IGNOU Central Library will also establish network linkages with other repositories in the nation such as 'Shodhganga' of Information and Library Network (INFLIBNET, India) to give global access to its resources
- IGNOU Library is planning to use the cloud infrastructure, by procuring the server space on which it will build its applications. The library will also migrate its Integrated Library System to cloud in coming days. Aggregated subject gateways that support systematic unified web-scale resource discovery from Ebsco Discovery Service is already on trial at IGNOU Library.

National Open Distance Learners' Library and Information Network

National Open Distance Learners' Library and Information Network **(**NODLIENT) is a national network of distance learning libraries for sharing collections, e-resources and services on a common platform initiated by IGNOU Library. Currently access to the network resources is open to IGNOU Community, and soon it would be extended to state open universities, and distance education institutes attached to conventional universities. NODLINET is mandated to offer 24 X 7 access to online electronic resources, anywhere, anytime to authorize members of the NODLINET network.

Some of the activities of the network include:
- Library automation on a centrally hosted system.
- Content digitization (of exam papers, course materials, course readings and institutional publications)
- Strengthening of ICT infrastructure in Libraries
- Standards for library development
- Information literacy tutorials and
- Linkages with consortium networks in the country.

The Open and Distance Learning System is vast and complex. NODLINET addresses issues of equity in the delivery of information services at par with conventional system to the millions of Open Learners-faculty, counselors, researchers and students in remote setting of the country. It is a platform for libraries and information centres of the Open and Distance Learning System of the country provisioning information resources and digitized content to its stakeholders from anywhere at any time using advanced technologies to enhance the quality of education at par with the conventional education system.

Conclusion

Technology in libraries will continue to function as a change agent, and the role of the librarian and information science professional will be redefined as technology expert, advisor, consultant, counselor, educator, intermediary, policy-maker, soothsayer, or trouble-shooter. By the primary goal will remain same to provide aaccessibility to library resources giving impetus and enhancement to the quality of academic programmes. It s noteworthy that IGNOU Library has always given tremendous assistance to it's learners. However the distance learners and library relationship can be further strengthen by providing face to face interaction through electronic media, so that their problems can be solved immediately.(Oladokun, 2002)

With information becoming more ubiquitous, and learning occurs anytime and anyplace, Library professionals need to provide distance learners with instantly accessible data which is credible, reliable, accurate, and have authoritative information. It is also seen that there is immense needs for

regular online training sessions for distance learners to help them learn the new structures of knowledge and modern ways of seeking information on the W3 world.

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