

Library without Walls for Distance Learners of South Asian Region: A Dream Far-fetched

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Abstract

There is a phenomenal growth of open and distance learning (ODL) in seven Countries of South Asian viz. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. The distance learners in ODL system can be supplemented and complemented by effective library support through information and communication technologies (ICT).

The advent of ICT revolution has brought about a dramatic transformation in all aspects of education including library and information services. No longer are books in modern library like bricks in walls; rather they have got converted into bits and bytes to create Library without Walls (LWW).

Experiments in developed countries such as US, UK, Australia, Canada and other European countries have succeeded in creating effective virtual learning environments to replace a teacher without any negative implications and render adequate library services to distance learners. But there is a wide divide between the ICT rich and ICT poor countries. Developing countries are still struggling hard to provide even basic library services due to various constraints.

This paper examines the library support provided by Open Universities of South Asian countries namely Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in general and India in particular. It also discusses the challenges OU librarians in India face in doing justice to library support to distance learners compared to their counterparts in the conventional system who enjoy access to information using ICT and Internet.

INTRODUCTION

Impressed by success of Russian distance education (DE) system, Harold Wilson, Prime Minister of United Kingdom recommended starting of DE in UK. Open University of United Kingdom (UKOU) was established at Milton Keynes in 1969. Since then there is a tremendous growth in distance teaching institutions; growth in print and e-learning programs; increase in number of conferences, seminars, training workshops; and growth in literature on DE. These developments have contributed immensely towards the maturing of a strong and sustainable parallel system of education.

OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SOUTH ASIAN REGION

South Asian Region (SAR) comprises seven countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). Administrators and policy makers in these countries have realized the potential of open and distance education (ODE) as an easy and effective option, which can fulfill national educational goals and learning needs of their populations. Inspired by success of UKOU, SAR countries have adopted ODE model across sixteen open universities (OU) – one each in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and 13 in India.

Allama Iqbal Open University (AIU), founded at Islamabad in 1974, was the first OU in SAR and second in the world after UKOU. In last three decades, it has opened up new opportunities for millions, especially women and rural people. Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) was established at Nawala, Nugegoda in 1980, integrating External Services Agency (ESA) and Sri Lanka Institute of Distance Education (SEIDE).

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) is the outcome of 40 years of effort. Audio-Visual education Centre (AVEC) created in 1962 and School Broadcasting Program (SOB) from 1978-80 were merged to create National Institute of Educational Media and Technology

(NIEMT) in 1983. Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) was established in 1985 incorporating NIEMT in its fold. BOU was founded at Gaizipur in 1992, and Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) merged with it later. In India, correspondence institutions started way back in 1962, on recommendations of Dr. D. S. Kothari Committee, to reduce pressure on existing universities and colleges. At present, there are 108 dual mode universities conducting both on-campus and off-campus programs to provide a chance to underprivileged people to pursue higher education through DE.

Andhra Pradesh Open University (APOU), established in 1982 at Hyderabad and renamed as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU), was the first State OU in India. At national level, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was established in 1985. Since then, 11 OUs have been established.

1. Vardhaman Mahavir Open University (VMOU) – Kota, Rajasthan (1987)
2. Nalanda Open University (NOU) – Patna, Bihar (1987)
3. Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) – Nashik, Maharashtra (1989)
4. Madhya Pradesh Bhoj Open University (MPBOU) – Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh (1991)
5. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University (BAOU) – Ahmedabad, Gujarat (1994)
6. Karnataka State Open University (KSOU) – Mysore, Karnataka (1996)
7. Netaji Subhash Open University (NSOU) – Kolkata, West Bengal (1997)
8. U. P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University (UPRTOU) – Allhabad, Uttar Pradesh (1998)
9. Tamil Nadu Open University (TNOU) – Chennai, Tamil Nadu (2002)
10. Pandit Sunderlal Sharma Open University (PSSOU) – Bilaspur, Chattisgarh (2005)
11. Uttaranchal Open University (UOU) – Haldwani, Uttaranchal (2006)

IGNOU has national as well as international jurisdiction, but other OU only have jurisdiction in their respective states. India also has National Institute of Open Schooling for school education at a distance.

Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal do not have open universities but run DE program in certain fields according to their requirements. **In Bhutan**, the first and only DE program for in-service primary teachers is conducted by National Institute of Education (NIE), Samtse since 1995. It has now adopted information and communication technologies (ICT), and this has already helped upgrade NIE's internal networking; created a website to allow students access information online; installed new software; provided supplementary learning materials, tutorials, and academic counseling.

In **Maldives**, Atoll Education Centers conducts English Language Course for adults through DE. Students' queries are clarified through teleconferencing. Realizing the potential of DE, Centre for Open Learning was established at Maldives College of Higher Education in 1999.

Nepal government has taken help from several International organizations to introduce DE. With assistance from USAID, Radio Education Teacher Training Program was launched in 1978 by supplying more than 25,000 radios to untrained, rural primary school teachers. British Council manages the Higher Education Links Program on behalf of United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID). It contributes to sustainable development of Nepal by enhancing research and training capacity of higher education institutions in Nepal through DE. Hickling Corporation has examined the feasibility of establishing a Centre for Open Learning / Distance Education in Nepal.

LIBRARIES WITHOUT WALLS: WEB-ENABLED LIBRARY SUPPORT

The phrase "Libraries without Walls" describes a library without physical infrastructure such as library building, operational sections, reading and stack rooms, circulation counter, furniture, equipment, collections in diverse media, and so on. They are

embedded into a virtual library and accessed through Internet from any computer system – desktop or laptop. Advent of ICT has brought about a dramatic transformation in all aspects of education including library and information services (LIS). Books are no longer like bricks in the walls of libraries; rather they have got converted into bits and bytes to create libraries without walls.

Perusing through literature available on world-wide growth of ODE in last three and a half decades, it is evident that librarians of DE institutions in UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, Hong Kong etc. have taken innovative initiatives to outreach LIS for distance learners. These experiments have created virtual library environments that render effective library support to users.

VIRTUAL LIBRARY SERVICES IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

UKOU has developed its electronic reference library for distance learners. A guided tour of "Open Library at a Glance" introduces them to different tools and information services available through "Open Libr@ry" (OPAL). It has created a Reference Sources webpage and designed a database of subjects and courses related websites called ROUTES (Resources for Open University TEachers and Students).

They have also developed **SAFARI**, (**S**kills in **A**ccessing, **F**inding and **R**eviewing **I**nformation), a free and interactive tutorial, available at www.open.ac.uk/safari. It helps students to search for information using tools such as databases, library catalogues and the Internet; identify literature in their subject area; evaluate and organize information; and compile bibliographies. They also have a **Learner Support Team** to assist them in using OPAL. (<http://www.library.open.ac.uk/#>)

Similarly, Athabasca University students can avail library facilities from **Digital Reading Room (DRR)**, a home-grown electronic reserve since 2002. It is a gateway to library's databases and faculty's teaching material. It mostly has resources that do not need copyright permission and handles all requests for document delivery and suggested readings from this system. (**Magusin and Kay: 2004**)

Electronic Library at Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) provides in-campus facilities and a Remote Access Guide to library resources. OUHK electronic reserve comprises e-journals, indexes and abstracts, dictionaries and encyclopedias, directories and handbooks, e-news etc. accessed by active students, staff, and part-time tutors. OUHK examination papers, reference materials, electronic theses and dissertations can also be accessed. OUHK library catalogue is available through both web and Telnet but latter requires Net Term or Simp Term software. (<http://www.lib.ouhk.edu.hk/>)

Remote Referencing Help Desk project at **University of Edinburgh** Library provides online browser chat to interact with a librarian while searching a database (EDINA BIOSIS, BIDS ISI, BIDS EMBASE or MEDLINE)". (<http://www.remote.lib.ed.ac.uk>)

Brigham Young University has created a portal for English course students, which gives access to electronic resources and library services. It has created course-specific library pages integrated with web-based courseware (Blackboard) (<http://uiclib.uvic.ca/dls/bibliography4.html>).

ELITE project at University of Leicester incorporates a web-based interface, chat reference service, and web forms for reference questions. (<http://www.le.ac.uk/li/distance/eliteproject/project/elite.html>).

There are number of such projects that were initiated and successfully implemented to provide value-added library services for distance learners.

CURRENT SCENARIO OF LIS IN SOUTH ASIAN INSTITUTIONS

Proliferation of Internet has resulted in digital divide not only between developed and developing countries, but also amongst developing countries based on their socio-economic, linguistic and technological capabilities. The prerequisite for DE in

marginalized communities is telecommunication infrastructure. While developed countries have resources in abundance, developing countries in South Asian Region (SAR) face dilution of their resources to provide basic needs to their huge populations. They are struggling hard to provide even basic library services due to ICT constraints.

Libraries of AIOU, BOU and OUSL are hybrid libraries having collections of different physical formats in varied media. Libraries at AIOU and BOU provide services to teachers, research students and staff members. **AIOU** library is not yet automated but **BOU** library operations have been computerized and OPAC search is provided at the main library. They have small core libraries at Regional Centers to outreach library support for distance learners. Only OUSL library provides direct access to distance learners. It operates as a network of libraries with main library at Nawala, four regional libraries located in Colombo, Jaffna, Kandy and Matara and small libraries at study centers. It has registered 25,000 members including 3000 distance learners as regular members who are eligible to use main as well as regional centre libraries. Distance learners have to pay a refundable deposit to borrow library books. They have a Virtual Information Resource Centre having 15 terminals at main library accessed through web OPAC. They are developing an online service for university academic staff too. But there still remains a wide divide between ICT rich and ICT poor countries.

Out of 13 Indian OUs, only IGNOU, BRAOU, KSOU, MPBOU, YCMOU and VMOU have well equipped hybrid libraries with proper infrastructure and regular staff. They have core libraries at Regional and/or Study Centers. Except KSOU library, all libraries are computerized and provide LIS services through OPAC. Other seven OUs are still in the process of developing their libraries.

Only KSOU enrolls all bona-fide students to avail library services on payment of refundable deposit. Apart from reading and reference services, undergraduates and postgraduates can borrow 2 books at a time. Every year 1500 students are registered and 15,000 books are lent with 100 students visiting the library each day. The library is best used during Personal Contact Programs, which is an intensive period of full-time study and library work for students. Small core libraries at study centers are mainly used by students and counselors. The library plans to acquire information resources in varied media; introduce scanning and photocopying facilities; facilitate Internet and e-mail services.

Library and Document Division (L&DD), IGNOU is a well-equipped hybrid library having collections of physical formats in diverse non-print media such as, electronic, magnetic, miniaturized microforms, optical, digital, and virtual. It is the most resourceful DE information centre in India. L&DD is a hierarchical system with Central Library at Headquarters followed by libraries located at Regional Centers (RC) and Study Centers (SC). Central Library caters to needs of academic, administrative and support staff at headquarters. RC looks into requirements of staff, students, academic counselors and coordinators, and SC meets student needs. The functioning and development of RCs and SCs is coordinated by the central library.

Central Library uses LIBSYS, integrated Library Management software with various modules for library housekeeping operations. Using LIBSYS Web OPAC, users can search Library's online catalogue by Author, Title, Subject and Keywords. Apart from reading, referencing, lending and reprographic services, library provides facilities for accessing information from CD, microforms, e-journals and on-line indexing, abstracting and full-text databases.

L&DD is founder member of Developing Library Network (DELNET) which provides browsing of Union Catalogues, inter-library loan and document delivery facilities from libraries across the country. Through membership of INDEST Consortium, it also provides access to various databases (ProQuest, ABI Inform, IEL Online and MathSciNet). It subscribes to J-Gate e-portal that provides on-line full text access to 59 e-journals, 2,500 free full text and over 12,000 indexing / abstracting journals, ProQuest Academic Research Library and EBSCO Academic Search Premier.

L&DD has an impressive website outlining collections, providing statistics and services to IGNOU staff at headquarters. L&DD has undertaken number of digitization initiatives. It has digitized question papers of all courses and examinations from inception till 2005. Question papers from 1987-2000 are available on CD from 2000 onwards are available on the website. Library has also digitized all minutes of meetings of the Board of Management and Academic Council for easy reference. (<http://www.ignou.ac.in/divisions/library/index1.htm>)

But despite all facilities and modern services and a new independent building with adequate infrastructure, why cant the networked library system of IGNOU outreach LIS services to RC and SC, and enroll distance learners as regular members like KSOU and OUSL? Why can't they be supplemented and complemented by effective library support using ICT like UKOU and HKOU? After USA and Canada, India has developed "Guidelines for Library Services to Distance Learners", so why cant IGNOU provide value-added library services for distance learners?

HOW CAN IGNOU MAKE THE FAR-FETCHED DREAM REAL?

IGNOU needs to have a full-fledged Regional and Study Centers Section at L&DD, and assign the responsibility of planning and equipping the section with necessary LIS resources to a Deputy / Assistant Librarian. The section can be developed in consultation with faculty of different schools, Computer Division and Regional Services Division. L&DD can:

- Provide remote access to under-utilized print, non-print and electronic resources to RC and SC through the WAN.
- Issue IP-authenticated username and password to students to avoid misuse and ensure they have seamless access to resources they need from home, office or cybercafe.
- Design guided tour for users giving information regarding –
 - Library gateway
 - Media resources available for reference and borrowing
 - Searching L&DD OPAC for relevant documents
 - Accessing course materials and question papers
 - Accessing e-journals and databases
 - Requesting books from DELNET
 - Applying for membership
 - Frequently Asked Questions
 - Seeking help and advice
- Build an electronic reserve from available bibliographical and full text digitized resources (Self-Instructional Material (SIM) of various programs).
- Develop a resource portal comprising relevant chapters of books, articles from journals and suggested readings in courses (postgraduate and research programs) in consultation with faculty and taking copyright permissions. Care should be taken to address logistic, commercial and legal challenges.
- Sign a MOU with Informatics (India) and DELNET to provide links to J-Gate and access to DELNET's Union Catalogues by students after making a payment.
- Access to subscribed databases through a mechanism of creating direct links, and making payments for articles requested by users.
- Conduct online training for library staff at L&DD, RC, SC to respond to queries of distance learners. They should have knowledge of programs conducted by IGNOU; provide assistance to access information from OPAC and electronic reserve; make policies regarding free or fee based library services; grant remote access to various databases needing permission; adopt document delivery policies of DELNET; and solve other problems of access to library resources.
- Create a Learner Support Cell to address queries during office hours and mechanism to record messages after office hours for response next day. Learners should be directed to answers for FAQs to avoid frustrations.

PROBLEMS IN PROVIDING VIRTUAL LIBRARY SERVICES

There are several hindrances and barriers in starting web-based services to outreach value-added LIS.

- Institutional mindset, attitude and readiness;
- Lack of planning for IT and web-enabled access;
- Cooperation from teachers;
- Costs of developing infrastructure and its maintenance;
- Lack of technological support;
- Dominance of English language for web access;
- Lack of contents in regional languages;
- Poor reading habits of learners.

When faced with financial constraints, first to be slashed are library budgets. Teachers sometimes feel that SIM developed by them is self-explanatory, self-motivating, self-evaluating, self-learning, self-directed and self-contained, and so there is no need for separate library resources. Students compare ODE courses with those of correspondence institutions and want to get degrees without putting much effort.

Conclusion

Distance librarianship is a very challenging and exciting experience. Librarians should reach out to needy learners and help them achieve success while deriving satisfaction from performing their duties well. Let me quote Elizabeth J. Burge (2002) who in her keynote address at the International Conference of Library without Walls – 4, observed that S. R. Ranganathan “developed the famous five laws of library Science for the context of his time”, --- and while concluding her address, she mentioned the “five maxims for librarianship in distance education” given below.

- “Clarify and conduct work in users’ terms (defined broadly)
- Build relationships (political, educational, informational, logistical)
- Value your intermediation as essential
- Reach past the technology tools to human conditions
- Grow tall from soil of a fine tradition, but avoid being root-bound.”

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