

THE CHALLENGES OF FLEXIBLE DELIVERY EDUCATION FOR INFORMATION SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the library and information services at an academic institution can meet the requirements of flexible delivery education.

In addition to my involvement in the distance library services at Technikon SA, I became interested in this topic when I served on various University and Technikon library committees. I have also participated in international conferences, networking events and electronic discussion groups on this topic. I have found the opportunities to debate on the challenges and to share solutions most rewarding as well as resulting in the stimulation of new developments. Therefore I want to congratulate the organisers on the programme and thank them for the privilege of being able to participate in this event.

FLEXILBE, OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

It is well known that there is an increasing diversity of education opportunities in open, flexible and distance education.

There is a fundamental shift from individual teaching to collaborative learning and teaching. Learning facilitation teams are replacing the individual teachers. The control and responsibility of the process is also shifting from the lecturer to the student. The move of control into the hands of the student has been assisted by the use of various forms of technology.

Furthermore, many changes have taken place in both contact and distance institutions. There is a movement from contact and distance education to flexible learning. Distance education institutions are introducing strong elements of face-to-face and internet tutoring in their programmes, while contact institutions are using distance education techniques to present both traditional distance education courses and on-campus part-time courses. There is also a move towards greater flexibility based on the principles of open learning, with its freedom of place, time, pace, access, exit and curriculum. Students can structure their own learning experience by selecting from a range of learning opportunities. These shifts are also assisted by the ever-expanding use of technology (Moore, 2001).

International competition in open, flexible and distance education is fierce, especially since the developments in technology. The positive result of the competition is that it encourages institutions to enhance the quality of their services and education.

It is important that each unit in an institution ensures that its distance educational applications are of international standard, thereby contributing to the competitiveness of the institution. Well-developed information and library services can, for example, be used in the marketing campaign for the institution. The obverse of the coin is that if the service is not suitable, the institution will not only lose a library user

but it will also not be able to retain its students which in turn will impact adversely on the throughput rate.

NEED FOR AND REQUIREMENTS OF INFORMATION SERVICES

It is important to note the need for and requirements of these services in education in general and in open, flexible and distance education in particular.

Information services for education

Information and Library services are an integral part of quality education and the student must be placed at the centre of the learning experience (Besser, 1997). The revolutionary influence of information and communications technology on the world in general and education in particular is accepted internationally. Library and information centres have the responsibility of providing access to the information and knowledge that need to be integrated into teaching and learning. It should ensure access to these resources in a timely and orderly fashion through a reliable information technology infrastructure and a functional web page. To enable students to make the best use of access to the information resources, they should be provided with library and information management skills training.

Information services for open, flexible and distance education

Based on the technological innovations in the transmittal of information and the delivery of courses, we have found an increased recognition of the need for library resources and services at locations other than the main campus. There is an increased demand and even concern for equitable services for all students in higher education no matter where the “classroom” may be (ACRL Guidelines, 1998).

International guidelines for distance education library services are available for institutions to develop and evaluate their services to students. These are, for example the ACRL guidelines for distance learning library services, Guidelines for library support of distance and distributed learning in Canada and Guidelines for library services to external students (Australia).

The guidelines are fairly similar and focus on the following aspects:

- Philosophy of distance library services;
- Management and administration;
- Finances;
- Human resources;
- Library material;
- Facilities;
- Marketing; and
- Services

The internationally accepted philosophy of distance library services is that the originating institution is responsible for ensuring services and resources equivalent to those provided for students and faculty on campus (ACRL Guidelines, 1998).

Institutions use various methods for delivering open, flexible and distance education. It is therefore important for the library to analyse and understand these and to work with the academics to integrate the information and library services into the programmes.

Furthermore, if you analyse these strategies you will find that it requires students to have information retrieval and management skills (Van Vuren, 1998). Multiple resources are integrated into the learning process. The students need to be able to access a variety of sources of learning from remote locations, to select and analyse information and to present the information in an appropriate form. They need to plan

how to use resources for different purposes, develop information management skills and develop competence in using sources of information.

However, many of the entrants into tertiary education can not be expected to succeed in a mode where independent learning predominates. Even in countries where there is a well-developed secondary schooling system, it is conceded that school-leavers are not usually independent students. They need support in order to learn how to manage and to accept responsibility for their own learning. They need to be assisted to move along the continuum towards more independent learning modes as they progress academically (Moore, 2000).

Information retrieval and management skills

It is important that academic libraries consider the fact that these learning strategies can only be successful if the students have information retrieval and information management skills. It is therefore important to note the programmes developed by libraries to offer appropriate training to facilitate the learning process.

Various terms are used to describe these training programmes. The modern view is that the skills are not limited to library use but include the skills to locate and utilise information outside the library. It includes all the components to render students library and information literate and indicates skills that are applicable in lifelong learning. This would also be to their advantage in the workplace, as it will be expected of them to be able to retrieve and manage information (Henning, 1997).

It is important that these programmes should be an integral part of the learning process to ensure that students acquire the skills needed to succeed in their studies. This also implies that the academic library functions not only in a supporting capacity, but is also indeed an integral part of this learning strategy. This strategy has been implemented for example at the North East Wales Institute in Wrexham, Wales and at the Deakin University in Australia (McKnight, 2001). Technikon SA is in the process of incorporating representatives from the library and information service in the formal academic planning and curriculum development structures. These are for example the Senate, Academic Planning and Curriculum Development Committees, Co-operative Education Senate Committee, Divisional Research and Post-graduate Studies Committees, Divisional Advancement of Technology and Application Committees, Divisional Academic Boards, etc.

INFORMATION AND LIBRARY SERVICES AT TECHNIKON SA

A brief overview of the information services of Technikon SA is provided as an example of information and library services in open, flexible and distance education.

Technikon SA

Technikon SA has adopted a flexible learning approach to meet the transformation goals of higher education and has achieved substantial progress in reaching out to the masses through distance education. Technikon SA was established in 1980 when it boasted 4 000 students and 22 academic staff members. It has grown to serve 60 000 students with a full-time staff of 1 100 as well as contract workers ranging from 2 000 to 3 000 at any given time.

Together with the growth in student numbers over the years, Technikon SA has welcomed the change in the student profile from mainly white male to a greater diversity of gender and race.

Gold Fields Library and Information Centre (GLIC)

One of Technikon SA's most important resources is the Gold Fields Library and Information Centre. Over a period of a few years it has developed into a modern, user-centred information provider which provides a comprehensive on-campus service as well as responding to the information needs of distance students.

The Library stocks almost 300 000 relevant and up-to-date items and facilitates access to many other resources to support the information needs of academics and students regardless of their location.

At the time the services were developed at Technikon SA, the student profile, educational environment and model differed from those of other distance education institutions. Technikon SA had to develop services suitable to the needs and profile of the students within the international guidelines for distance library services.

Alliances with other libraries

The management of the Gold Fields Library and Information Centre realised from the outset that the library should initiate mutual beneficial alliances with other information providers in order to be able to endorse the philosophy of being responsible for services equitable to those for users on campus.

For the convenience of the students the library purchases, processes and distributes books from the main library to some 280 community libraries throughout South Africa. The number of books on various subjects placed in each community library is determined by the geographic distribution of the students as well as the number of students studying a particular course in that region. The major part of the student collection is decentralised to the community libraries.

Recommended journal articles are also made available to libraries in bound volumes. The required copyright permission to duplicate these articles is obtained annually.

Most community libraries experience severe financial constraints and these collections are most welcome. However, in some instances they also lack sufficient staff to provide a service to the students and the library then facilitates the placement of suitable students as part of the ETOP programme. (Paid for by Technikon SA according to certain criteria).

The Gold Fields Library and Information Centre is a founder member of the Gauteng and Environs Library and Information Consortium (GAELIC). GAELIC has 16 members and its focus is on resource sharing. To facilitate the sharing of resources the consortium has implemented an international state of the art computer system funded by an American Foundation.

The library also co-operates with the other two distance education institutions in South Africa, UNISA and VISTA within the Confederation of Open Learning in South Africa (COLISA). The focus is on sharing decentralised facilities, information technology infrastructures and the delivery of library materials in support of distance education.

The library co-operates with 14 other technikon libraries throughout South Africa to enhance library services for technikon students within the Inter Technikon Library Committee (ITLC). A memorandum of agreement between these libraries provides for services for students from other technikons.

Learner Centres

The library participates in the establishment of learner centres to provide academic, administrative, computer and library services to students. These are utilised to expand access to information available in electronic format to students.

Other services

In line with Technikon SA's mission to provide a more flexible client centred environment for its students, the institution has launched the third version of the Virtual Campus. The Virtual Campus is called TSA COOL which is an acronym for Technikon Southern Africa Co-operative Online Learning. It has become a useful tool to distribute courseware and enables two way communication between students (group discussions), students and academic staff, students and industry specialists and students and interactive content. Administrative assistance is also available for students.

Students can use TSA COOL to access the web page of the library and other resources available electronically. The African Digital Library (ADL) is available to users in all 54 African countries free of charge. The ADL has approximately 8 000 full-text eBooks selected by librarians in Africa from the eBooks available on netLibrary.

It is however important to note that many students in South Africa do not have access to electronic information services and for libraries to maintain the other services to them. Therefore, the students are also cared for on an individual basis via the postal service. This ensures that every student, even those in the most remote areas, has equal access to the resources. This service includes books and periodical articles.

The library has a lending service on the campus in Florida for students in the region.

The library has developed a user-education programme for novice, intermediate and advanced levels of information competency. The library co-operates with faculty to develop and offer these courses. Different media is utilised to ensure exposure to various formats and facilitate easy access.

Communication with students is important both to establish their needs and to inform them about the services available to them. For example, the library distributes posters to communities to promote the services available for students in community libraries. The library also distributes pamphlets, bookmarks, utility boxes, etc. to students with information on the services and relevant contact numbers. The library publishes articles in the quarterly student newsletter and local community newspapers.

Process

The following process is followed to ensure access to the required resources to facilitate teaching and learning.

The library arranges with publishers and booksellers to exhibit their latest publications on campus. These publishers and booksellers are present on campus and in this way the library promotes communication between the academics and the book trade. The library also distributes information on new publications to lecturers. The academics can therefore evaluate and select current and suitable publications to prescribe and recommend.

Information obtained in this way is incorporated in a book list on the campus network. Information on the subject, lecturer, titles and booksellers can be retrieved from this programme through various search points. Upon registration, students are provided with a printout of the relevant information for their subjects. The booklist is accessible to publishers and booksellers in an electronic format to ensure the availability of books to students. The booklist contains the recommended and prescribed titles. The library purchases the recommended titles and provides these to students on loan as explained earlier. The prescribed titles are on sale at book sellers. A full-time book list co-ordinator monitors this process and evaluates the performance of the book sellers continuously.

CONCLUSION

The contribution of libraries to the development of countries and the contribution of academic libraries in the educational process is recognised internationally. Academic libraries should position themselves to meet the requirements of open, flexible and distance education. The opportunity for academic libraries to integrate the information retrieval and information management training programmes into the academic programmes should be optimised. Libraries should therefore co-operate with faculty to ensure an integrated learning experience and to enhance the quality of the academic programmes.

Communication with academics and with the students is very important to ensure that the services are developed according to the needs of the users. The challenge for students is to use the resources and facilities in a responsible manner and to optimise the opportunity to succeed.

The value of a well-developed library service should be emphasised and demonstrated in terms of student retention and student throughput.

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