LEARNER CENTRIC - OUTREACH SERVICES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS: OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Providing new library services to distance learners is a challenge. However, introduction of new services add strength to the library user community. The OUSL library started new outreach services to its distance users. This paper discusses how some new services and resources were implemented, who the beneficiaries are, how to access and what sort of information is provided. These services are two folded; web based and onsite. Digitized Question Paper Archive is the most significant to users. The paper further discusses about the Curriculum Information Support Service that was aimed at the academic staff. Inquiry service is the most prominent service that is used by many academic staff members to find research articles. Further, a newly started project, E-abstracts of postgraduate theses and OUSL Journal is also popular among students. In addition, the on-site academic presentation practice facility provided for students is another new service given to OUSL learners.

Key words: Distance education and support services, distance learning, web based services, online support services, virtual information services, Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction

The Open University of Sri Lanka was established in 1980 with the purpose of providing higher educational facilities to those who could not enter the conventional universities and to train the government school teachers through distance mode. The OUSL conducts courses from foundation level to Diploma and from Degree to PhD level programmes. No formal qualifications are required to register for foundation courses. Students who do not wish to register for regular programmes are given an opportunity to offer Stand Alone Courses in specific areas. The OUSL adopts a multimedia study system, but mainly depend on print materials and contact sessions. Different forms of contact sessions are introduced by different faculties such as workshops, day schools, tutor clinics, and tutorial classes.

Regional educational Department co-ordinates the academic activities of the programmes offered by the four faculties namely Faculty of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Engineering and Faculty of Natural Sciences. The university has a network of 04 regional and 26 study centres distributed throughout the country. Facilities are provided at centres for registration, distribution of course materials, reference facilities at centre libraries, conducting day schools, and holding of examinations.

The provision of distance learning is now an integral part of the education policy, as it can adjust to the demands of people of various age groups, learning experiences and types of employment. With the rapid development of distance education, nature of information access, and the provision of equitable services for all students has become extremely important in serving the needs of distance students.

Brophy (1997) reflects about library support in lifelong learning. He states that the principles and issues in this area include the need for libraries; to move towards services on demand to all users, to provide services through cooperative arrangements with other libraries to deliver a full range of services.

including value–added services to a large number of customers before other competitors step in to fill the needs of lifelong learners.

It is very difficult to define the services as the characteristics depend on the type of the library. However, Lessin identified five possible models:

They are,

- the branch campus library;

- the trunk delivery system;

- the use of local libraries;

- the use of on-campus library for all users, both on and off-campus; and/or

- a mix of the above (Lessin,1991)

Access to quality library services is required for all campus-based programmes. Therefore, counterpart service must be available for students. De Four (1997) quotes Kascus and Aguilar because they have pointed out basic requirements that are needed for distance library services. According to them, basic requirements are availability of access to adequate facilities, adequate funds, core collections, professional library staff, reserve reading collections, and supplementary materials.

Further, De Four quotes Watson, and states that the essential student support services are...

- access to print and non-print materials that support bibliographic needs;

- consultation services;

- inter library loans;

- photocopying services;

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- the production of library and literature guides;

- prompt document delivery; and

- reference services.

One of the greatest challenges faced by distance librarianship today is providing such library services to the remote learners. Even so, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Guidelines for Extended Campus Library Services states that:

"The parent institution is responsible for providing support which address the information needs of its extended campus programmes. This support should be provided to the extended campus community equitable with that provided to the on-campus community. The library has primary responsibility for identifying, developing, coordinating and providing library resources and services which address the information needs of the extended campus community" (Caballero,1998).

Library resources are becoming increasingly available in electronic formats, and librarians are under greater pressure to provide access to online information for their patrons. Library users expect that they should have access electronic resources at any time of day (24x7) and from any location, to satisfy their information needs.

To meet these expectations, many libraries now provide their users remote access to library research databases. When database access was restricted to users within the library, librarians were confident that they will be able to identify users in need of assistance and to provide them with instruction at the point of use. However, with the advent of remote access technologies, librarians are now challenged to provide instruction in database selection, searching techniques and information evaluation to the invisible user.

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1.1. OUSL Library services

Main library at main campus has more facilities such as reference, lending, ILL, Internet access and CAS etc, as mentioned by De Four (1997). But the core book collection and past exam papers are available at all centre libraries dispersed all over the country. Students are allowed to refer and photocopy any material. Lending facility is restricted to the main library, Kandy & Matara regional centre libraries.

The OUSL library services are also challenged to fill the gap between information rich and information poor. As Sri Lanka is a developing country, the library cannot afford purchasing all the information products that our clients need. Therefore, it is important to practice information sharing. E-resources can be shared with less expenditure and give equal facility to students who have scattered all over the Island to fill the gap between information have's and have nots in distance learning set up.

Many foreign studies have revealed that the Internet has become central to the concept of virtual teaching and learning due to the advancement of Information Communication Technologies. A local study (Gunasekera, 2007) reveals that academic staff of the Social Sciences Department of the OUSL is using Internet as the main source to find information for their academic activities.

However, situation in Sri Lanka can be a little different from developed countries, as facilities are not available equally to all the distance learners. Facilities at urban areas are more, compared to remote areas. To overcome the digital divide, the government of Sri Lanka has initiated establishing Internet access centres like Vidatha and Nanasala all over the country. These centres provide Internet access at affordable rates. Further, infrastructure for internet access in OUSL centres were also improved with the patronage of Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) recently. Therefore, new services to share information for distance learners could be introduced. Moyo & Cahoy (2003) states that academic library could adequately address the needs,

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preferences and expectations of its remote patrons; it needs to understand the peculiarities and challenges of serving at a distance.

Within this situation OUSL library also planned to move from traditional library services to modern online services. The central library was able to materialize one of its major goals with the collaboration of DEMP. The goal of any library whose parent institution offers distance programs is to provide library services and resources equivalent to those provided on the main campus. With this in mind, OUSL Library established the 'Virtual Information Resources Centre' and launched its services in April 2006 facilitating remote learners to share the information among them. Most essential services were introduced and most relevant e-resources were offered through LAN and WAN.

2. Our strengths to offer services

Having infrastructure facilities is a wealth and a strength for the service providers to implement different services and facilities to meet different remote user needs. Strengths that are available at OUSL library, are described below.

2.1 Virtual Resource Centre

The prime objective of the Virtual Resource Centre (VRC) is providing online access to the electronic information resources and services available at the OUSL library and worldwide for distance users. It consists of 15 user terminals to facilitate the accessing for e-resources, Internet browsing. Two terminals are dedicated for email checking. In addition, it is equipped with 4 file and print servers to store and archive the e-resource collection, 2 CD ROM servers to provide simultaneous access to selected CD ROM databases, and printers and scanners as auxiliaries. Two staff members are assigned at VRC to support learners.

2.2 Core book collection

OUSL library is well equipped with a core books collection recommended by academic staff according to their course requirements. The library tries to

purchase copies of recommended titles for the regional centre libraries as well. Collection meets the needs of the academic staff as they need books to write course materials. Other than that, books on general nature are also purchased. The collection includes OUSL course materials too.

2.3 Sophisticated instruments

Many sophisticated instruments such as Kyocera 3 in 1 document scanning machine and filing system, flat-bed scanners and colour printers, computers for each member of staff, multimedia projector, audio visual equipment etc. are available at the main library. Some of them were purchased with the help of Distance Education Modernization Project. These kinds of instruments are also available with trained staff at audio-visual centres in Kandy and Matara regional centres to facilitate learners.

2.4 Trained staff

The success of computer-based library system depends much on key personnel who provide strength, enthusiasm and intelligence to the new system. Six professional, 11 paraprofessional and 5 supportive members are available at the library to support distance learners. All members were trained recently locally by offering them relevant workshops. Professional and paraprofessional staff members were trained both locally and internationally by arranging familiarization training programmes in UK, Malasia and India.

2.5 Automated Library System

The library is fully automated with bar-coded materials and member cards. An automated circulation system is functioning to facilitate front-desk operations to give speedy service to library users. The resource base and membership database are integrated to provide the circulation system active. As a result, users from any remote point can access their own profile and information about the library collection easily and quickly. The library system will soon be

integrated with the Financial and Student Management system of the OUSL (A Management Information System) – a project in progress.

2.6 Library website

OUSL library website is one of the important achievements of the library as its services can be given to distance learners via the distributed library concept. Anyone can access to website through its URL, http://lib.ou.ac.lk, and can access to e-resources and products. A screen print of the library web page is given in fig.1 below.

Fig.1 OUSL website (http://lib.ou.ac.lk)

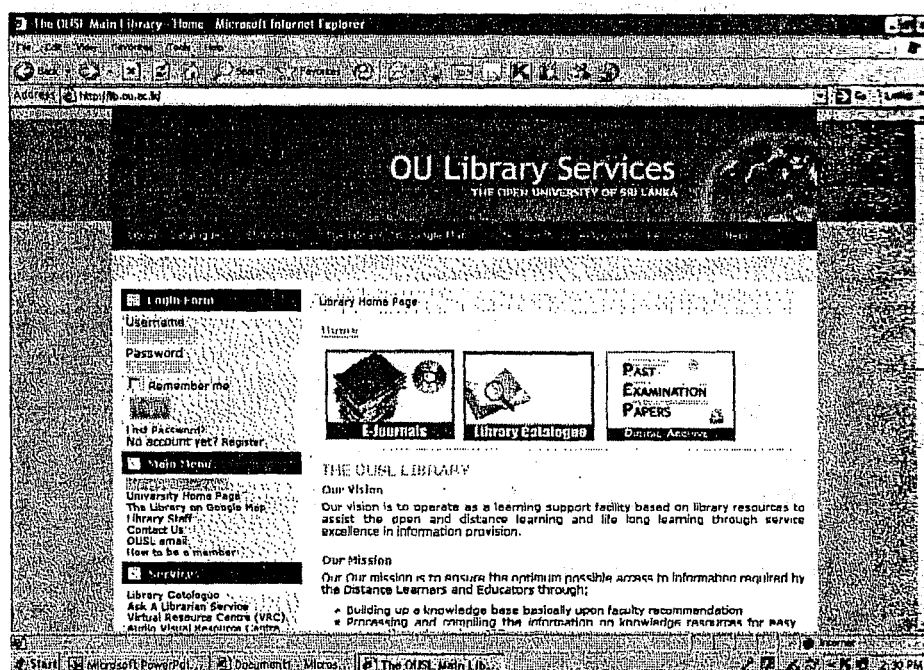## 2.7 OUSL Productions – Printed/AV Materials

OUSL academic staff produces course materials and AV materials according to course objectives. Collection of printed course materials is maintained at all

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main and regional libraries. AV materials are kept at the Audio Visual Resource Centres with viewing and listening facilities. Most of the resources are core materials that students have to refer in writing assignments which is a major activity in distance education setup.

2.8 User universe

Ensuring information for all, despite the fact that they are on-site or off-site, the virtual library portal was developed as given in Fig: 2 (Seneviratne, 2007).
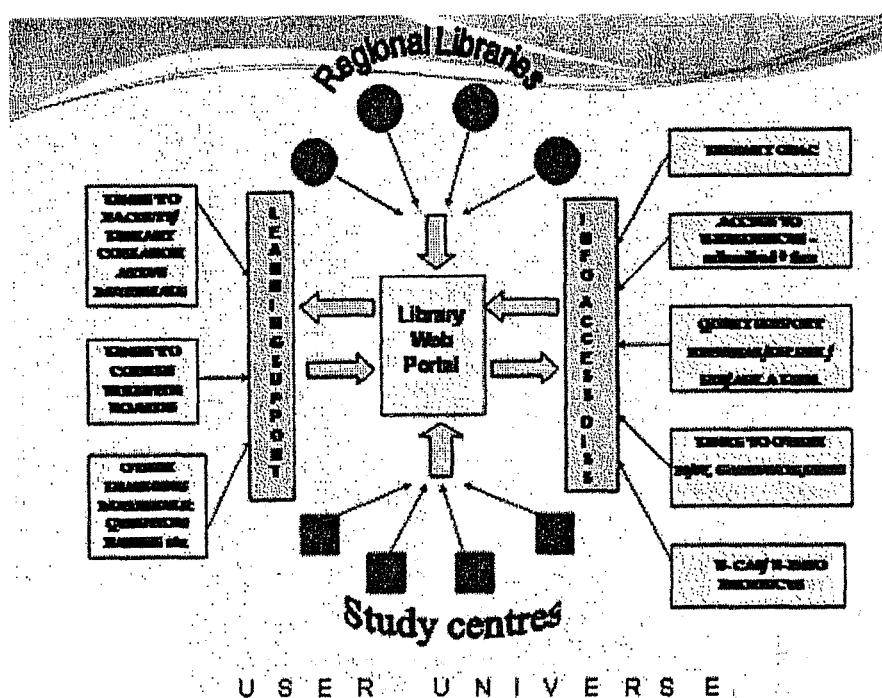

Fig.2 Value-Added functions planned – Virtual Library Portal (from Seneviratne, 2007)

User universe' is a model that describes information flow from main library to other regional and study centre libraries. OUSL library has a vision of how information should be available at centre libraries and how they should be

distributed among remote learners. Accordingly this model was developed to achieve that vision.

The model which is partly operated, shown in figure 2 also describes how web portal is linked with information resources with learning support needed by distance learners at the main campus and those attached to regional centres. Learning support needed by distance learners are given in left side of the model. It emphasizes the importance of linking resources according to course reference list. Different e-Information products that were linked the web are given at the right side of the model. Having this kind of a clear picture of information sharing among remote learners using regional and study centres is another major strength that OUSL library has.

2.9 Regional Educational Services

The OUSL has 4 regional and 26 study centers in all parts of the island. The central campus and the Colombo Regional Centre of the OU are situated at Nawala[1].

Administrative functions of the university and its branches are handled by the Registrar, while the educational services and the functions of regional centers come under the Director of Regional Educational Services (RES).

Regional centres are administered by the Assistant Directors who are directly responsible to the Director/ RES. Library staff who work at centre libraries report to the Assistant Directors, but directions and guidance relevant to library activities are given by the Librarian at the main campus. Books and other materials recommended by academic staff are also distributed by the main library.

With those facilities and resources, OUSL library started a number of user oriented online and off line services to its remote learners.

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The university assigns an important role to teacher-student contact sessions at these study centers which helps students both academically and personally. In addition to teacher assistance, study centers offer students a common forum for interact sessions in support of developing social welfare through counseling (Singh, 2006).

3. Recent achievements

Present library services alone cannot meet the needs of the remote distance learners, because their information needs and seeking behaviour is different at each level from each other. Therefore, library has to provide a more personalized service to suit the distance learner needs.

Accordingly, library had to consider the present information flow of the distance mode teaching and learning environment at the OUSL. This was supported by previous research carried out by Lekamge (1999) and Gunasekara (2005). They have studied study patterns and the frequency of use of information by remote learners and have recommended necessity of effective information services for independent learners.

With that understanding and consideration of recommendations of the previous research, the OUSL library planned to implement a Virtual Resource Centre to support distance learners for their academic activities.

4. Web based productions

Today, Library and Information Managers have to be become Electronic Information Managers too. They continue to face many challenges in providing services to meet user expectations. Electronic modes allow them to enhance services, to cut down repetitive work, and to maximize the stock availability etc. Electronic resources & services that are accessible through OUSL library website are given below.

4.1 Digitized Question Paper Archive

The library has started a digitization project with the support of the ADB, which covers the OUSL course materials and past question papers and intends to extend to an institutional repository. Past question papers relevant to the programmes of four faculties are available online at present.

4.2 Subject gateways

Subject gateway which can be accessed through OUSL portal is another asset given to distance learners who study legal studies department. This subject gateway helps users to save their time as it give ready references for the information.

4.3 E-abstracts of Post Graduate theses

Another recent achievement of the OUSL library is the E-abstracts database of Post Graduate theses. The main objective of this project is to build an e-abstract collection on distance education related research activities. This is an ongoing project.

4.4 OUSL Journal Online and conference papers

Database of abstracts of OUSL journal articles is another project directed towards building a distance education e-research collection.

Full text papers of annual OUSL academic sessions are also available through the library web site. This collection will be more useful for researchers who are interested to study in the field of distance education in Sri Lanka.

The following resource collections are also being processed to allow access for library users.

- Research publications of OUSL academic and administrative staff

- Links to subscribed e-resources and important free on-line resources

- Digitized resources and archives

4.5 Web based services

Considering the present information flow and online teaching and learning environment, OUSL library implemented following electronic services.

4.5.1 Inquiry service – Ask a Librarian Service

'Ask a Librarian Service' is provided through telephone and email communication. Two staff members are assigned to answer those inquiries.

4.5.2 SDI service - academic staff

Selective dissemination of journals content pages was started in 2007 with the aim of supporting research activities of the academic staff of the OUSL. Academic staff members were informed about the service at faculty board meetings. Their profiles (interested subjects) and article keywords are maintained in CDS/ISIS databases. Matching the profile with keywords is done automatically.

4.5.3 Content page delivery service on request via e-mail

This service is also implemented with the aim of assisting academic staff in their academic research activities easily. In addition to SDI, content pages are delivered on request.

4.5.4 Curriculum Support Service – Pilot study with Legal studies database

OUSL offers distance mode teaching and learning. Academic staff produces course materials for their students. Additional and compulsory reading materials are also recommended. 'Reading lists' are attached to each course material expecting more reading from students, encouraging the independent learning method. The library maintains a substitute database entering bibliographic data of the materials that are mentioned in the 'reading lists' of the course materials,

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to new database stating location of the material. This will help distance learners to access information easily. Eg. Legal studies database. Students who follow legal studies programme can check the availability of material without wasting time. This is a pilot project started with Department of Legal studies and planning to extend to other academic departments. Materials available in the OUSL library system are tagged and location descriptions are given on the list itself. If some materials are available from other sources, that is also mentioned.

4.6 Onsite services

Few other newly introduced services for both academic staff as well as distance learners are described below.

4.6.1 OUSL inquiry service

OUSL main library launched the OUSL inquiry service recently and any inquires from any method; e-mail, telephone, fax, mail, are handled by a library assistant with the help of a professional staff member. New inquiry desk is located near the main counter. This service is more useful to distance learners who come rarely to the library. Research studies (Gunasekera, 2000, 2007) have revealed that generally distance learners visit the library only when a special need arise. Therefore, they need special attention when they come to find information. Statistics are maintained regarding all inquires. The following table shows the monthly inquiry statistics from June 2008 to December 2008, done by the academic staff of the OUSL.

Table 1- Monthly inquiry statistics (2008)

Department	Jun	Jul	Aug	Oct	Nov	Dec
Management Studies	2	-	3	3	1	1
Early Childhood Education	4	1	3	2	-	2
Dept. of Social Sciences	-	-	3	3	-	-
Dept. of Physics	1	3	3	2	1	-
Dept. of Engineering Technology	-	3	-	-	-	-
Total	7	7	12	10	2	3

Out of total 42 inquires 38 were regarding research articles and all the articles were supplied with the help of subscribed databases and British Library Document Delivery Service. There were two inquiries on membership for visiting staff and council members. There was a inquiry from a academic staff that how to know how many people have cited his articles, and was referred to National Library Services Board. It was observed that inquiry service was used by 5 departments representing four faculties but service was mostly used by the three departments such as Management studies, Early child hood education and Physics.

4.6.2 AV screening facility

Audio Visual screening for individuals and groups is available at the Audio Visual Resource Centre. A new multimedia projector and a 32" TV has added value to these services. Any registered student can use this facility.

4.6.3 Presentation practice facility for students with guide videos – Overhead projector & multimedia PC

OUSL academic staff produces guide audio visual materials according to curricula of the each department. As OUSL offers multimedia study system, learners have to prepare presentations especially in engineering courses using those guide videos. The library started this service of enabling users to utilize library resources for creating and practicing presentations.

4.7 Wireless hot spot

Wireless hot spot facility is available in the library and students and academic staff can use this facility for their academic activities. Students are allowed to use their laptops inside the library.

5. Conclusion

OUSL offers distance mode teaching and learning to its learners. Library has to support this by enabling distance and onsite information services. OUSL library

has so far been successful in fulfilling objectives of distance learners by enabling many electronic services. In addition, recently introduced inquiry services enable user education to make them efficient in utilizing resources. Library support university academic activities through these attempts to achieve goals, vision and mission of the Open University of Sri Lanka.

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