REVIEW

RESPONDING TO THE LIBRARY NEEDS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS

Jelena Đurđulov*
University Library "Svetozar Marković" - Belgrade, Serbia

One of the current trends in higher education is the rapid growth of distance education. Until recently, distance learners have not been able to access the rich resources of documents available to campus students, one factor thought to undermine the quality of distance education. However, the Internet has changed all this. In his work "The Answer to the Needs of Distance Learners for Library Services" which was presented at the COBISS 2010 conference, Sir John Daniel examines how universities with distance learning library services are accessible and how their students use them.

The organization Sir John Daniel belongs to -The Commonwealth of Learning - in particular specializes in advising governments and institutions on distance learning and the use of technology in education in general.

The term distance education applies to forms of education where a student follows a course of study, but has little or no face-to-face contact with the teachers in the institution offering the course. This therein means that various forms of communications technology have to be used to bridge the gap between the institution and the student. The earliest form of

*djurdjulov@unilib.bg.ac.rs

distance education was done through correspondence. Since then there have been a succession of different forms of communication technology: radio, film, television, computers, DVDs and the Internet, as well as social communication media such as FaceBook and YouTube.

In his famous book *The Wealth of Nations* from the 18th century, the economist Adam Smith outlined the four essential principles of technology that have driven the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries and have continued to define how most of us work today. These principles include division of labor, specialization, economies of scale, and the use of machines and communication media.

The question is as to whether technology is able to have the same impact on education that it has had on the manufacturing of products and the offering of other services. Governments want to widen access to education so that it can be available to all citizens that aspire to achieve one and maintain the quality of education while keeping the costs as low as possible. If expressed as a vector triangle, this challenge can be made clearer. With traditional methods of face-to-face teaching this can be seen as an iron triangle. If stretched, one side must be reduced in relation to the other two. In the same manner, greater access with more students in each classroom will damage quality. Better learning resources increase costs, and cutting costs will endanger both access and quality. Technology can transform the iron triangle into a flexible triangle.

Take for example The UK Open University: The UK Open University has 220,000 students in award-winning programs, with 60,000 of its students overseas. Depending on the subject, the cost per graduate of the UKOU was 60-80% that of conventional universities the last time costs were compared.

A much larger number of universities are now offering distance learning programs alongside their classroom campus courses. These are what are called *dual-mode institutions*. Investing in distance learning materials costs money and it makes sense to amortize those costs over as many students as possible. This is why some dual-mode institutions pick highly specialized subjects offered by few universities worldwide and offer graduate programs in these subjects. Examples might be Powder Metallurgy or Forensic Psychology since there are fewer comparable offerings worldwide.

It is often thought that every professor will be able to handle both distance and on-campus students. Experience shows, however, that if a university wishes to make distance learning sustainable, it has to divide tasks up and have people specialize in doing them.

Library services are a vital element of student support.

The author cited the paper "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. This paper mentions numerous examples of distance learners whose studies are hindered by poor library services. The authors of this paper developed a list of an institution's responsibilities to distance learners in providing library services, starting from their professional codes of ethics as librarians and any other guidelines they were able to find. Their list contains ten items of which five were cited by Sir John Daniel: 1. institutions must take responsibility for providing library support to their own distance learners; 2. distance learners must have access to library services and support in an equivalent manner as students on campus have; 3. distance learners may need library services that are more personalized than those for on campus students; 4. defend intellectual freedom and avoid bias; and 5. respect information integrity and intellectual property.

Professors should show the library support needs for the courses they are developing at an

early stage so that a support plan can be worked out. Librarians should work with schools to establish exercises in library use for distance learners, even more so in training these students on how to use online resources. Additionally, although professors will generate much of the 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, and ensuring that the institution has the appropriate permission to use the material when it is under copyright.

Open Educational Resources which are usually in digital format and are freely available for adaptation and use, will become a tremendous asset for universities embarking on distance education; in that, librarians can be very helpful in understanding the various versions of the Creative Commons license that Open Educational Resources use.

It is easier to direct students to resources in a physical library than in an online environment. However, some services can be both personalized and automated. For instance, 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 Teach-

ers and Students) which provides a set of useful resources for every subject area. These resources are checked by the University staff for their relevance and are updated regularly. A newer service is MyOpenLibrary that personalizes the service a bit more. In addition to ROUTES, it gives students an online space that they can customize to meet their own needs.

A library should respect the integrity of information and intellectual property. 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. Librarians should advise faculty and students about copyright and teach information ethics as a part of library instruction.

One useful way of approaching distance education is to reflect on the fact that the instructor teaches on campus whereas the institution teaches in distance education. In a similar manner, individual librarians serve students on campus, whereas distance learners look to the library as a whole for its services, which subsequently means that the library has to organize itself somewhat differently.