

An Empirical approach for Modeling the Distance Learning Library Services in Kerala

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Abstract. Library and information services are indispensable support services for distance learners and an integrated approach with a specific plan is proposed to have a collaborative distant library and information services by utilizing the facilities of the large number of public, college and university libraries in the state of Kerala. Authors foresee that the framework and working plan for exploiting the potentials and institutionalizing the scattered services under a consortium is essential in Kerala to serve the distance learners.

Keywords: Library Distance Services, Distance Learning

1. Introduction

Distance Learning has become one of the major channels for imparting higher education in India as the nation cannot create the infrastructure required for providing higher education to all aspirants through formal means. Many universities in India have a huge number of distance learning programs to enhance access to higher education. The universities in Kerala have also started distance learning courses long back. When we look at distance learning courses, the students who take up the courses are equal in all respects to those who study at the campuses. They also need all support services for their learning process.

Library and information services are indispensable support services for distance learners. As already mentioned, a large number of post-secondary students are pursuing distance courses in the four universities in Kerala. But the university libraries are not providing any services worth notable for distance learners. They are a group of students who need more library support than the regular campus students.

An integrated approach with a specific plan could provide the distance learners with library and information services by utilizing the facilities of the large number of public libraries and college libraries in the state.

2. Need for a service model

Even though there had been serious discussions at professional platforms globally on the need for distance learning library services, the concept has lacked a clear outline and a mechanism by which it could be made an operational reality in Kerala. The lack of a practical framework for distance learning library services is rooted in many facts. The indifferent attitude of the distance educators and librarians in the state is a major factor behind it.

The individual university libraries in Kerala have their own infrastructure, which can be extended to the distance learners too. Yet another huge potential that can be used for distance learners is available to the college and public libraries in the state. A framework for exploiting these potentials and institutionalizing the scattered services as a

comprehensive whole is essential in Kerala to serve the distance learners. Hence a working model for providing library and information services for distance learners in Kerala is presented here.

The library and information services for distance learners can be carried out at three levels. They are host university based services, consortia based services and web based services.

The services available at the host university library (Library of the University that provides the course) are intended for distance learners who are able to reach the library and avail them. The consortia based services are intended for those who cannot go to the host university libraries. Web based services are intended for all distance learners, whether they are residing near to the host university library or anywhere on the globe.

3. Host university library based services

The host university library should be the hub of all distance learning library services. A separate exclusive section in the university library will be assigned with the responsibility of the delivery of various distance learning library services. This section namely the Distance Learning Library Services Section (DLLS Section) will have the following functions:

- It controls the entire distance learning library services of a university library.
- Controls the consortia based services and web based services.
- Maintains a help desk in the university library for reference services for distance learners.
- Maintains the digital library and institutional repository for distance learners.
- Manages the consortia arrangements with other libraries.
- Provides document delivery and inter-library loan for distance learners.
- Provides library instruction and information literacy programs for distance learners.
- Manages marketing of distance learning library and information services.

The DLLS Section will be the master center of all distance learning library and information services of a university. This section will manage the collection development policy for distance learning library services. It will select the books; decide on the number of copies of a book to be purchased and the provision of books and other information sources for the members in the consortia of libraries. The DLLS Section will also provide document delivery and inter-library loan for distance learners.

The management of the consortium arrangements with other libraries will be another important function of the DLLS Section. DLLS section will also provide reference services to the distance learners, who contact either directly or through e-mail or telephone.

All the above functions will be carried out by the DLLS Section in consultation with the faculty of the distance learning unit of the university. It will arrange periodical meetings with them to design the strategies for distance learning library services.

The DLLS Section of the university library will design printed guides and software modules for library instruction and information literacy programs. The professionals in charge of the DLLS Section will meet the distance learners during their contact class sessions and make them aware of the distance learning library services and facilities.

4. Web based services

The DLLS Section will also provide service for distance learners over the ubiquitous network of computers, the Internet. The web based services include:

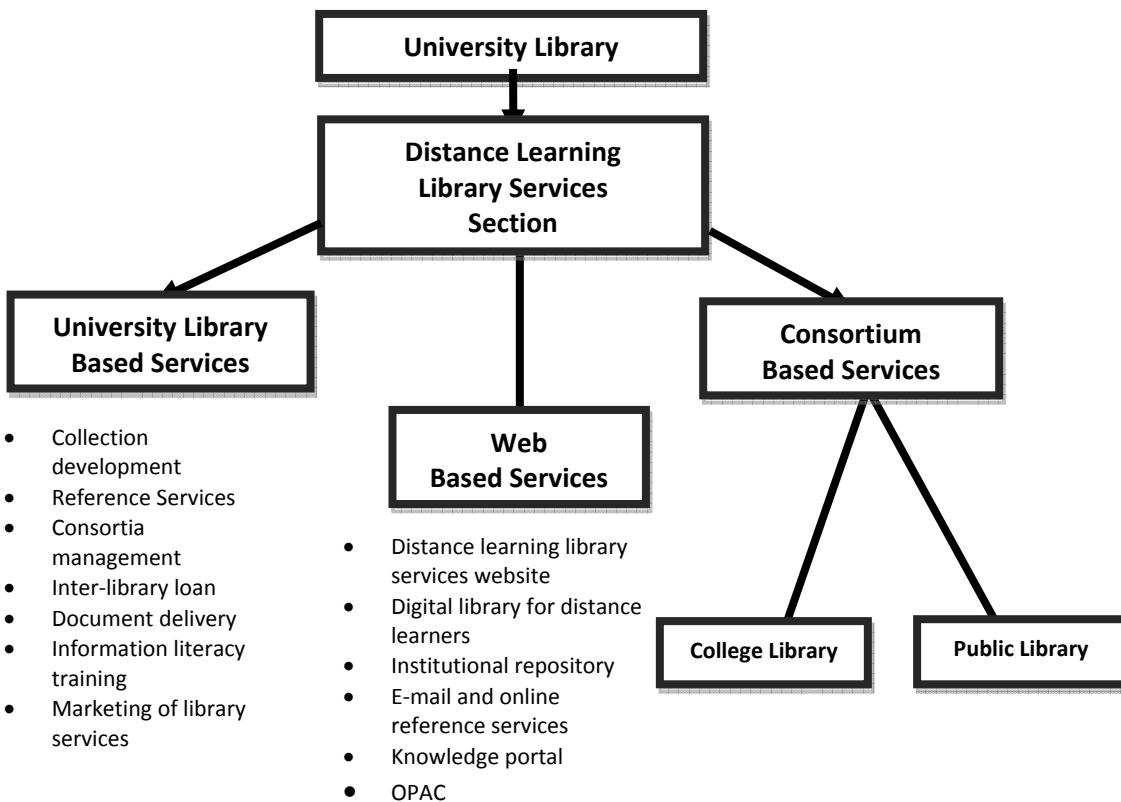


Figure 1. Model of distance learning library services in Kerala

- Maintaining of a website for distance learning library services
- Maintaining of a knowledge portal for distance learners
- Maintaining of a digital library for distance learners
- Maintaining of an Institutional Repository for distance learning library services
- Provision of access to e-journals and bibliographic databases
- Provision of information literacy tutorial

A website for distance learning library services providing links to all web based services of the university library for distance learners will be maintained by the DLLS Section. A link to this page should be available in the home page of the library.

The links to the digital Repository of e-learning modules, e-journals and bibliographic databases, will be available in this web page. A hyperlink named ‘Ask a Librarian’ will lead to the creation of an e-mail message that can be sent to the DLLS Section. The web page will also provide an Information Literacy tutorial and pages containing Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). It would be desirable to restrict the services on this web page using the user name and authenticated password.

4.1 Digital library

An organized collection of digital documents useful for the distance learners will be maintained in an online locus on the web by the DLLS Section of the university library. The documents which are exempted from copyright restrictions will be made available in this digital library. These documents will be indexed in the name of the authors as well as keywords. The services can be restricted with distance learners using an authenticated password.

4.2 Digital Repository

A repository of digital documents can be created using free software like the e-prints or DSpace, in which the faculty members and librarians can deposit documents that are useful for the distance learners. The documents can be classified based on the courses. The faculty members of the colleges and the experts in various fields may be

encouraged to deposit documents useful for distance learners subject to moderator approval. The DLLS Section can also deposit documents which they trace out in response to reference queries so that it would be useful in future services.



Figure 2. Working of the Digital Repository

4.3 Access to e-journals and bibliographic databases

The universities in Kerala have access to the UGC Infonet e-journal consortium. This facility could be extended to the specified terminals in the library extension centers in consultation with the consortia managers. The colleges which have this facility should be urged to provide it for distance learners.

4.4 Collection of question papers

The question papers of previous examinations were found to be very useful for distance learners. The library can digitize these question papers and provide the collection through the web page. The collection should be categorized under the course and then by year.

4.5 Knowledge portal

A portal is a gateway to various related web sites. The university library should identify useful and informative web sites related to the courses. All those links could be provided in the knowledge portal. Subscribed online reference sites like the Encyclopedia Britannica or Oxford dictionary also could be added in this page. This will be an exhaustive source of information for the distance learners.

4.6 Information literacy tutorial

A distance learner, novice to the latest technology would find it difficult to retrieve useful documents from digital collections. Hence training should be given to them at the beginning of the course itself to use the library as well as the web resources. An interactive tutorial could be provided in the web pages created for distance learners.

4.7 OPAC

The Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) of the library would be a very useful tool for the distance learners. The students could find out books useful for them through this catalogue. Later they can request for document delivery at the DLLS Section, if they need it.

4.8 E-mail reference services

The library should maintain an e-mail account with the intention to receive reference queries from the distance learners. An e-mail message can be created for this account by clicking on the ‘Ask a librarian’ hyperlink in the DLLS home page. The reference desk in the DLLS Section will respond to these queries either by themselves or by forwarding the queries to the subject faculty / experts. The responses will be sent to the e-mail account of the students without delay. Each distance learner must be provided with a unique identification for providing e-mail reference services.

The Reference questions and the answers also can be collected and made into a database. They can be indexed and later from this reservoir of reference questions a web page containing “Frequently Asked Reference Queries (FARQs)” can be created and maintained. The web is a medium which has superseded the constraints of space and

time. Hence it can be effectively used for serving distance learners. An innovative and proactive approach is necessary for designing library and information services for distance learners.

5. Consortium based services

The potential available with the four university libraries, 186 college libraries and the 63 Taluk Reference libraries could be easily brought in to help the distance learners in Kerala, if a consortium of all these libraries is created and made functional. The structure and functioning of the consortium are discussed in detail below.

5.1 Consortium of university libraries

The four universities viz. the University of Kerala, Mahatma Gandhi University, the University of Calicut and the Kannur University, based on mutual agreements, should allow all distance learners to use their university libraries. They may be allowed lending and reference facilities in the university libraries. The university libraries should provide consortium identity cards to the distance learners and allow them to use the university library of their preference. This helps the students to make use of the university library in their proximity. The example of 'UK Library Plus' consortium could be adopted for this.

6. Library extension centers

The university libraries should start separate library extension centers in all the fourteen districts of Kerala. It was found that the concentration of students of a particular university is more of the same and neighboring districts where the university is situated. No extension centers are required in the district where the university and its library are situated. Hence the extension centers are required only in ten districts. The following pattern can be followed since starting extension centers.

University	District
University of Kerala	Kollam
	Alappuzha
	Pathanamthitta
Mahatma Gandhi University	Eranakulam
	Idukki
	Thrissur
University of Calicut	Wynad
	Malappuram
	Palakkad
Kannur University	Kasaragod

The library of the University of Kerala already has three library extension centers in the neighboring districts. Other university libraries have to establish their library extension centers. The Kannur University library could manage only a single extension center at the university library is only in its developing stages. The facilities required in the extension center are the following.

- Collection of books to support the courses
- Reading room facility
- Internet facility
- Photocopying facility
- Collection of question papers
- Collection of reserve materials
- Training to use the library

The extension centers should be managed by cordial and helpful staff and their timings should suit the needs of the distance learners. The extension center could also work as a career guidance bureau for the universities. The university

responsible for maintaining the extension center should provide the required personnel resources and finances for the extension center. Most important aspect of an extension center is that it will provide service to any distance learner from any university in Kerala. The students registered for distance courses in any of the four universities in Kerala, visiting with proper identification and authentication should be eligible to avail services. This should be agreed upon among the universities on establishing the extension centers. Universities should provide funds and resources for the development of all extension centers. But special care should be given to extension centers directly under them.

7. College libraries and public libraries

Each university library study center should identify three public libraries (Taluk Reference Libraries) and three college libraries within the district where they are situated. These public libraries and college libraries should be encouraged to provide library and information services to distance learners. They should be provided with resources in the form of funds and information sources. All facilities available in the college and public libraries should be made available to the distance learners too. The college libraries may be allowed to collect fee for value added services. Distance learners should carry identification records from the university while visiting these libraries.

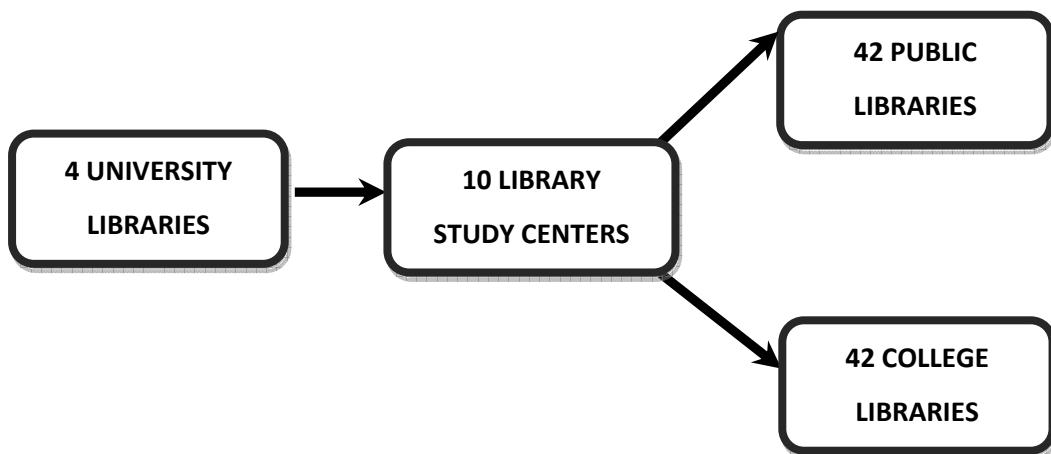


Figure 3. A network of libraries to support distance learners in Kerala

The consortium consisting of the four university libraries, ten library study centers and the 84 public and college libraries would make a huge network of libraries useful for distance learners. Web based services will be complementary to the consortium of libraries.

The students should be aware of the availability and potential of the distance learning library services. Hence marketing and orientation services are essential. The DLLS Section should take initiatives to bring out printed guide books. These guides should be provided along with the study materials. The URLs of the web pages providing information services to the distance learners should be printed on all communications to the students. Librarians in charge of the DLLS Section should provide orientation classes in the initial stages of the courses.

8. Conclusion

All these would ensure a systematic provision of library and information services to a bunch of post secondary students in Kerala, who are otherwise devoid of such facilities. But, the proactive and innovative librarianship is the fundamental ingredient in distance learning library services.

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