

Distance Education and library Resources at Vista University: From unplanned growth to a visionary Package

Mr. Juliano M Kabamba
Director
Library Services
Vista University
Pretoria, South Africa
E-mail: kbmba-jm@acaleph.vista.ac.za
<http://www.vista.ac.za>

Historical Introduction

Vista University is the youngest of the twenty-one public funded universities in South Africa however, by far, it is the largest of the ten Historically Black Universities in the Country. The university was founded in 1982 following the recommendations of a commission of inquiry to investigate university needs of urban black communities in South Africa.

Vista University shares a number of negative features with other institutions that make up what is commonly known, in the education sector in South Africa, as the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions, as opposed to Historically Advantaged Institutions. Among such attributes are poor and inadequate infrastructures in buildings, equipment, materials, library resources, and social amenities. Geographically, these universities are located, far away from the business and commercial centres, in less accessible rural or underdeveloped peri-urban areas. By historical designs academic pursuits in those universities are concentrated in the 'soft sciences' embracing education, humanities, and social sciences. The government subsidy formula, upon which university funding largely depends, has resulted in under funding of Historically Black Universities and contributed to the financial crisis which is now posing a serious threat to the continued existence of some of these institutions.

Overview & Composition

Currently the university has a student population of over 25,500 attached to eight campuses which are spread over three of the nine provinces of South Africa. About 40% of the students population are enrolled in distance education. The university offers undergraduate and post graduate degrees in the faculties of Management, Arts, Science, Law and education. One campus caters for distance education and the rest are more devoted to contact students. All contact campuses are located in some of the major black urban areas in the country.

Vista University, as a multi campus institution, is managed at the Central Campus in Pretoria however, day-to-day academic activities are decentralised at campus level. A similar anatomy of organisation applies to the library. Each campus has a library nevertheless, overall library administration, acquisitions, cataloguing and processing of library materials are carried out by the library directorate at Central Campus. On the other hand clients services including circulations, library promotion, reference services and user instructions are performed at campus library level.

The advent of a democratic and majority government in South Africa in 1994 created an opportunity to usher in a process of transformation at Vista University. Among the more notable and promising offshoots of this process was the developments of a strategic plan and re-engineering of university organs and administrative structures around the new vision and mission of the university. The library seized the occasion to produce a business plan which was neatly tied to the institutional strategic plan.

To date the library book collection has grown to about 407,000 volumes (87,000 titles) and 1,700 serial titles distributed among the eight campus libraries. Under the auspices of the GAELIC; a regional library consortium, to which Vista University is part of, the library is in the process of migrating from ERUDITE to INNOPAC system. The library subscribes to a number of CD-ROM databases accessible to the university community in a wider area network. On-line access to electronic journals and a select number of national and internationally renowned remote databases has increasingly becoming a major source of learning, teaching and research information to Vista University.

Distance Learning Programme

The establishment of Vista University Distance Education Campus was originally construed as a mean to improve academic and professional qualifications of teachers. The main focus was on certificate and diploma levels of education. More recently, however, a strategic decision was made to phase out certificate courses and concentrate on degree programmes. In 1999 over 10400 students were studying at Vista University, under the distance education programme, not only in the faculty of education, as was the case before, but also in Law, Management, Arts and Sciences.

The learning model was essentially based on printed text and more or less emulated tuition programmes offered at contact campuses for full time students. Interactive study guides, prescribed and recommended textbooks and assignments are the main support materials and activities for teaching and learning. Students are expected to buy prescribed and recommended texts. Delivery of learning and teaching materials is by correspondence. Important points of contact in the learning process are Learner Support Centres elected at designated Colleges of Education. At each centre Vista University has engaged, on contract basis, a Tutor assigned to give academic support to students in that region. At appointed and pre-arranged dates students are invited to Learner Support Centres to consult with Tutors on issues of concern and attend special lecture sessions to supplement on correspondence materials. These centres also provide students with rare opportunities to share their learning experiences and socialise.

Library Services: 1982-1998

Until late in 1998 the provision of library services at Vista University, de facto, precluded distance education students even though there was no written policy to that effect. The Central Campus Library which was especially intended to serve academic information needs of distance education had a very narrow scope in its human and material resources, facilities and services. Only the teaching staff who were also based at the Central Campus and a limited number of tutors, scattered in a select number of Learner Support Centres, were privileged to use the library.

In the absence of evidence to suggest that the university excluded distance students from library services, deliberately and consciously so, I suppose, one can only speculate. Under funding of the university, referred to above, could have limited the capacity of the university to extend library services to students. Secondly, it appears that there was an erroneous assumption that the materials sent to students were sufficient to meet their information needs at their level of education (certificate and diploma). Thirdly, it seems there was lack of pressure or will, from the library, teaching, students or university administration, for that matter, to make library provision for distant students. It should also be noted that in the 1980s, more so before, distance education did not receive much attention in the university education circles. Although it was considered as an important avenue to create learning opportunities for people who could not attend full time contact education it was generally considered to be less significant and secondary to contact education. Lack of interest or competition in distance education, from other universities, could also be cited as a contributing factor. Fewer universities, than is presently, cared to offer tuition in distance mode. Even the number of students following distance education was far smaller than is the case at present, in proportion to students in full time contact education.

Library services: 1998 -

The Library Business plan: 1989 - 2000 took note the plight of distance learners and proposed some important steps to address the problem. Among such recommendations was the establishment of a new position of Campus Librarian to provide leadership in the development of library services for distance learners. To give thrust to the initiative the Library Directorate engaged Vista University academics, who held key portfolios in the delivery of distance education, in a series of discussions to tease out the concept of library services for distance education and probe more viable contents and forms.

As we advanced in planning for extension of library services to off-campus learners we came to the realisation that the services would have far reaching implications for staff, resources, equipment and finances but the library was wanting in these requirements. The fact that our students resided in all provinces in the country, including neighbouring Namibia, made our task even more challenging.

However, we did not have to reinvent the wheel altogether. We solicited advice from libraries in two tertiary institutions that had a longer tradition in distance education and with whom our university was collaborating in a number of areas. From the experience of these institutions, postal services, as a mean of sending learning materials, was noted to be unreliable due to delays in delivery and significant rate of lost library materials. This was particularly problematic in rural and remote areas in the countryside. Incidentally a high percentage of our students lived in the same areas. The common practice and main sources of learning resources was to deposit a limited number of recommended library materials, for students use, in branch libraries or/and, by arrangements, in public libraries, located as near as possible to students' residential areas. Given the militating factors in resources, equipment, facilities and finances, the urgency to deliver to our students, and the assumption that growth in the population of off-campus students would, in the near future, be greater than that of on-campus students, we found the idea of partnership, with other institutions, to be more viable as a point of departure.

Planning the Way Forward

We asked ourselves. If building partnerships with other institutions was the route we were going to follow, what would be the nature of the such partnership, which institutions would be targeted and what would be our modus operandi to ensure success?

While we appreciated the difficulties of making precise predictions of the future composition and the geographical location of our off-campus students we noted from previous records of students' enrolment that regions that showed higher concentration of students populations had done so consistently over a long period of time. Therefore a decision was made to give high priority to these areas. We then proceeded to look at the selected cluster regions to identify Colleges of Education and public and community libraries that were within reasonable access to our students. We were particularly keen on Colleges of Education that had been designated, by our university, as Distance Education Learner Support Centres since many of our students had already become familiar with these institutions in their interactions with Tutors. Furthermore, it was our understanding that Colleges of Education, being academic institutions, would probably be more accommodating to our proposal.

Forging Strategic Partnerships

From the onset we knew that setting up fully fledged remote resource centres for off-campus students would require a great deal of planning, negotiations, lobbying, study materials, manpower and time. Only a revolution would have made it possible for our university to assemble all these resources at once. Therefore we deemed it prudent to adopt a phase-in approach. It was apparent in the joint meetings we had with faculties that if we succeeded in setting up remote collections at strategic locations, in established libraries, we would have laid the necessary foundation to develop library services more or less equivalent to services enjoyed by on-campus students. With this objective in mind we decided that our terms of reference with Colleges of Education and any other libraries we would go into partnership with would centre around establishing remote reserve collections or deposit small collections that our students could access by either using such materials within the library or borrowing for use at home.

With this objective in mind we arranged for visits to meet with College Principals and Librarians of selected institutions. In the discussions that ensued we, in particular, made reference to the predicament of our students and noted the merits of the proposed scheme. We highlighted, in details, the support that would be forthcoming, from our institution to give effect to the idea and make the scheme less burdensome to the host institutions. In no uncertain terms we emphasised that the scheme was essentially an experiment subject to fine tuning to make it more manageable and that in the unlikely event of the scheme compromising the core business of the host institution termination of the scheme could be considered. In the discussions we took time to explain how the host institution could benefit from the service. Mentioned was made of the direct access to the our reserve collection, and opportunities to borrow materials, on interlibrary loan, from our Campus Libraries. It was indicated to our colleagues that in the times of library budget cuts and weakening buying power of our currency the proposal was in

conformity with the ideals of resources sharing which is a generally acceptable and well entrenched survival kit in library practice. Some college management officials specifically introduced financial incentives for use of institutional facilities and manpower. Our reply was that, indeed, that was a plausible suggestion that could be tabled before Vista University management for considerations. However, our humble request was to allow the scheme to overgrow the experimental premises and generate statistics upon which we could base the criteria to levy Vista University.

By and large, the first round of discussions was a success. Most colleges accepted our proposal, in principle. These visits also created an opportunity for us to examine library facilities of colleges. It was a relief to note that almost all college libraries we visited were well secured, security wise, and had ample rooms to accommodate our study materials. The few colleges that had reservations about our proposal requested for more time for further consultations with their stakeholders before they could respond.

Upon completion of college visits we prepared a draft “ Memorandum of Agreement ”, while our minds, were still fresh. Since then a number of colleges and public libraries have signed the agreement of cooperation and the first batch of study materials have been sent and are currently in use.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Management Structure

It can be asserted from the above account that our approach had been largely re-active. One can postulate, and rightly so, that the efforts to establish services for off-campus learners were primarily activated by a sudden realization that off-campus students had been excluded in the provision of library services. However, the setting up of library deports and reserve collections should only be seen as the first step towards leveraging off-campus students in their studies.

Most certainly, the creation of a position and appointment of a qualified librarian, responsible for the distance education services is a catalysts to development of library services for distance learners. The librarian has already moved forward in providing leadership, set up the management structure and define areas of responsibility for other staff members assigned to provision of off-campus library services.

Policy Statement

Nevertheless, a broader mission statement that will inform further development of library services should be put in place. In such a mission statement the library should explicitly affirm its obligation to support library services for distance learners and acknowledge that off-campus students have equal rights to library services like on campus students. In this respect Vista University should take a lead by stating categorically that it will strive to provide library services, to off-campus students, equivalent to services offered to on-campus students. To avoid inequitable services between on-campus and off-campus students library management and funding for the latter should be independent of the former.

Students Profiles

There is a danger that if services for off-campus students are treated as an extension of or appendage of the on-campus services, imbalances in services to be rendered may occur. This could be manifested in development of off-campus services at the expense of on-campus library services or vice versa. Most likely off-campus library services may suffer poor quality and lack of depth.

There are risks at stake if we assume too much about our understand of information needs of students. In dealing with off campus students, in particular, we need to take time to study their needs and give some thoughts to possible barriers to information flow and alternative sources to information that may be available to students.

Vista University students should not be regarded as homogenous. They could be differentiated by the university programmes they study and transport and communication infrastructures obtainable in their geographical locations. Similarly we may identify points of contrasts in varieties and strengths of library and information centres that may be found within easy access to students between two different geographical locations. Not to mention that some areas may not have any of these facilities. On the other hand students' prior knowledge of information searching skills may also differ according to individual experiences. Insight into available means of communication between library staff and students will be crucial. Some students may have access to telephone and fax facilities, others may not. The same goes for e-mail, web or computer facilities. Most probably the majority can only be contacted by postal services. We need verification and proportions.

The library will need such information to plot the nature and extent of information services that students may require and appropriate methods of delivery. It could be useful to establish if students will be able and willing to pay for certain services that the library can ill afford such as photocopying of full text articles, courier services or priority mail services, and other intensive information searches that may not be freely available to both on and off campus students.

Library Service Programmes

Once students profile are developed it will be easier for the library to determine the nature of library services, priority areas and also plan for the mode of delivery. For example, these profiles can guide the library on deciding whether a students cohort of specific attributes, located in a given area, will require a particular service. These profile will also be useful to categorise students cohorts and sites, by different levels of support for reference work, bibliographic instructions, document delivery, inter-library loans, borrowing privileges and information literacy.

Procedures & Documentation

Much of what will evolve as library policy for distance learners will probably stem from the formulations and parameters that will emerge in the articulation of the library service programme. There will be need to document and publicise policy statements and systems guidelines to faculties, administration, library staff and off-campus students. Procedures that will effect Colleges of Education and other partner libraries should also be well known to all concerned staff and students so that all commitments and responsibilities covered are commonly understood to avoid

undue expectations. Relevant forms for requests, such as interlibrary loans, placements of reserve materials, literature searches etc should be readily available to off-campus students and partner libraries.

Feedback & introspection

It is common for systems and practices of this nature to include an element of feedback to reflect on performance and cost effectiveness and recommend intervention, if necessary. Therefore the management system should embody a culture of record keeping of transactions and other patterns of significant occurrences. Statistics generated through this system will form the baseline data for monitoring and evaluation. Some statistics will be, more or less, self-generating, through library computer system. Other have to be deliberately recorded such as telephone or fax requests for on-line information searches.

The librarian responsible for distance education will be required to visit, from time to time, partner libraries to discuss matters pertaining to library services and attend to concerns that may arise. Programmed consultations with the relevant faculties will be essential to ensure that the library programme remains relevant and up-to-date with study programmes. Consultations can also assist the librarian to anticipate and plan for future information demands. With time, close working relations between the librarian and faculties can result in greater collaborations in curriculum development that will ultimately enhance the actualisation of the ideals of lifelong and independent learning.

Concluding Remarks

Admittedly Vista University may not find it easy to achieve complete parity between off and on campus learners in the provision of learning resources. This is especially true if one considers the special privileges that campus-based students may enjoy such as immediate access to a wider array of information, the skills acquired through more regular and direct contacts with library staff and the opportunities to share knowledge and experience when students converge in groups. Nevertheless, this is the principle which should inform Vista University support for distance learners to improve students success and retention.

The opportunities that the information technology of today offers in digital recording and electronic transmission of bibliographic and full-text data and online access to remote databases can be useful equalising factors for off-campus students on the basis of the principle of equivalent services. Vista University must vigorously interrogate this technology in terms benefits that will accrue to the university and students, costs as well as sustenance. Donor support and concerted effort with like minded institutions are some of the avenues open to Vista University given its financial limitations.

Vista university must not lose sight of the growing number of universities and other tertiary institutions in the country that are opening the doors to distance education with full knowledge that distance education has a promising future in higher education. As the number of institutions multipliers, in this industry, so will be the competition for students. It's the universities that will demonstrate prominence and unequivocal academic support that will be in a better position to attract the millennium students. Competitiveness in this arena entails a sound vision, realistic

programme of action and the necessary resources to drive the process.