

LIBRARY SERVICES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

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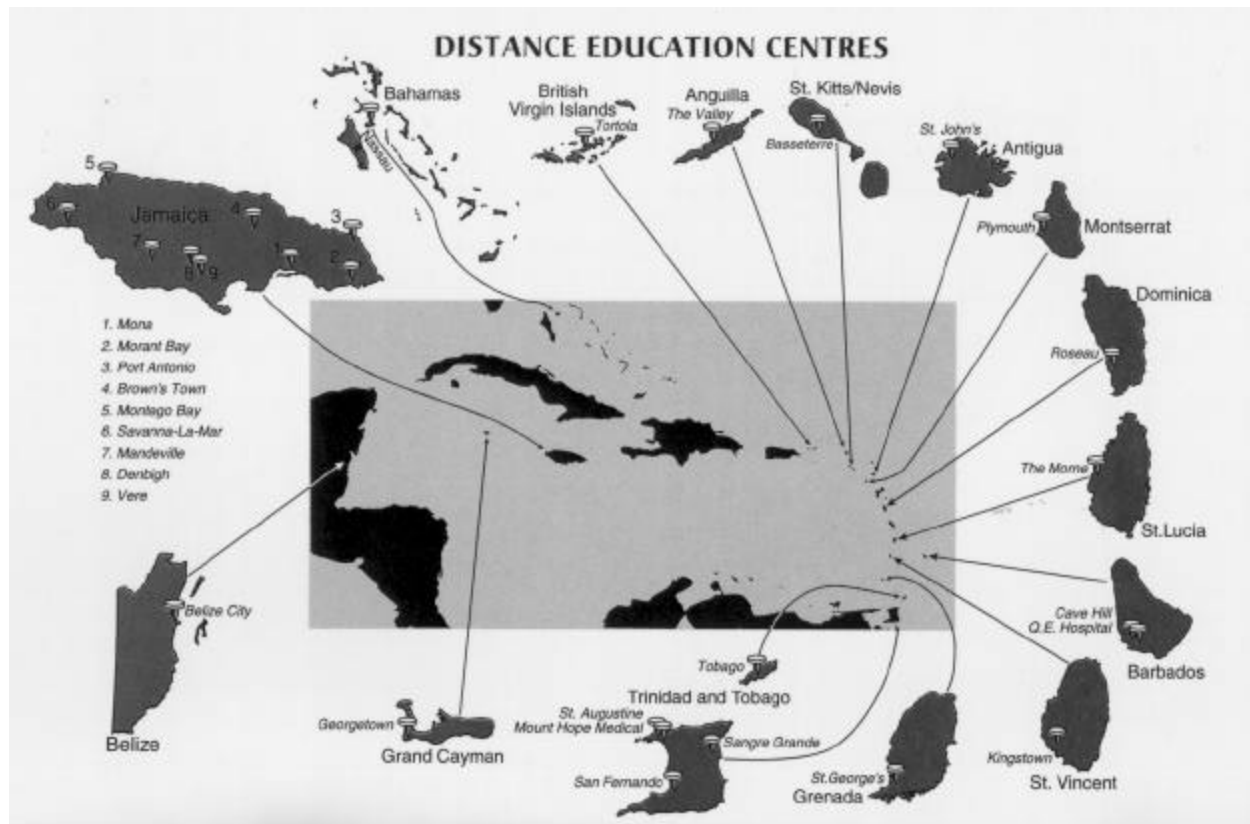
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BACKGROUND

The University of the West Indies (UWI) enrolled its first students in 1948. Until 1962, when the UWI received its charter, it was one of the affiliated colleges of the (British) University of London. (It was known as the University College of the West Indies). From a single campus at Mona, Jamaica the UWI is currently a three campus university, each of which is located on a different island. (It is one of only two regional universities in the world. The other is The University of the South Pacific.) The other UWI campuses are at St. Augustine in Trinidad and Tobago (1960) and at Cave Hill in Barbados (1963) (see map).

From a single Medical Faculty in 1948, with 33 students, the UWI now offers a variety of degrees (undergraduate and post-graduate), diploma and certificate courses to approximately 20,000 students (1999-2000) in the faculties of Agriculture, Arts and Humanities, Education, Engineering, Law, Social Sciences and Pure and Applied Sciences.

In 1982, the UWI began to offer formal training opportunities via distance modalities and from an initial five distance teaching sites, there are currently 26 UWI Distance Education Centres throughout the English-speaking Caribbean (see map).



OUTREACH PROGRAMMES

From its inception, because of its regional dimensions, limited facilities and resources and the distance between the non-campus countries and its campuses, the UWI established Extra-Mural Centres (now Schools of Continuing Studies (SCSs)) to support the UWI's outreach initiatives to the wider Caribbean Community. Located around the Caribbean, these centres are central to the UWI's distance teaching programming.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AT THE UWI

In 1977, under a Challenge Programme (the precursor to distance education at the UWI today), students in the Non-Campus Countries (NCCs) were able to pursue the 1st year B.Sc. Social Sciences Programme by attending classes at the Extra-Mural Centres. Under this programme support services, including library services, were minimal.

In 1982, after some years of research into using satellite and communication technologies for delivering educational programmes to remote areas, the University of the West Indies Distance Teaching Experiment (UWIDITE) was started with sites on each of the 3 campuses and one each in Dominica and St. Lucia. By 1984, more than 400 students were participating in courses transmitted through UWIDITE. Between 1982 and 1992, in addition to the 1st year B.Sc. programme, a variety of diploma and certificate courses were delivered at a distance across the region. The current enrollment figure for distance students of the UWI is estimated at 3,500.

In 1992, the UWI's commitment to distance teaching was affirmed when it declared itself a dual/mixed mode institution. UWI students in several disciplines enjoy a choice of pursuing their studies through either face-to-face, or distance learning or a combination of both strategies. Access to distance education was widened to include persons who were resident in a campus territory. Distance courses are delivered through a combination of print,

video and audio self-instructional materials with the possibility of periodic face-to-face and/or audio conferencing tutorials.

During the early part of the 1990s, the UWI embarked on a major restructuring exercise including its programming in distance education. In 1996, the Distance Education Centre (DEC) was established under the Board for Non-Campus Countries and Distance Education, a new administrative entity. All distance education programming at the UWI has been amalgamated under a single umbrella, the DEC. The overarching aim of the DEC is to provide world class distance education for Caribbean people, and in so doing help the UWI to achieve its mandate of widening access to tertiary level education and training, thereby unlocking the potential of the region for growth and development (Bellot et. al., p.11).

By 1997, distance education programme offerings were widened to allow students in the region to pursue full degree programmes in Management Studies and Agribusiness Management as well as Certificate Programmes in Adult Education.

The distance education sites of the UWI, are currently being upgraded to facilitate multimedia and interactive distance education programming. This upgrading represents a considerable improvement to the capability and capacity of the existing system. Improved voice quality, the ability to send and receive single-frame, real time video, access to the Internet, application sharing among computers throughout the network, the ability to have concurrent teleconferences, and a workstation computer lab at each site (Caribbean Waves, p.3).

LIBRARY SERVICES FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION AT THE UWI

Early experiences

While equity of access to library services is desirable, the UWI recognises that its distance students are not as well served as its campus-based students. When the SCSs were established, libraries were integral features of these units. Over the years however, many of the SCSs libraries were not maintained, while some have noticeably deteriorated. Lack of funding for collection building and other purposes, space constraints, varying interests in library issues/services of the staffs of these centres and the absence of professional services are among the major reasons for the underdeveloped state of most of these libraries. These factors led to small collections, outdated titles, pilferage, the absence of critical texts and other important items for university level programmes, inappropriate furniture and fittings as well as insufficient copies to support the class sizes at each centre. Support from the local public libraries is limited due to the primary focus of these libraries, their small budgets, the increasing costs of university level titles and the limited number of professional staff in these islands, many of whom are not well versed in the information needs of tertiary level learners. Photocopying, IT hardware and software are expensive. Further, electrical and telecommunications services are poor in many of these countries. These realities mean that although the Internet has eradicated the information disenfranchisement of distance learners in other countries, Caribbean distance learners are further challenged to access information and library services readily, quickly and cheaply because of the additional barriers which have been cited.

Early UWI distance learners in the non-campus countries depended heavily on the specially prepared packages of course materials provided and wherever available, local information resources and services. In 1994, Steele conducted a survey into the perception of some students from the Eastern Caribbean with regard to library services for distance learning and their expectations. Findings indicated that students wanted access to essential texts, copies of lectures (notes or audio) and the provision of a quiet place to study and write.

Regrettably, most distance students of the UWI do not have access to the campus libraries for several reasons. Many Caribbean distance students do not live in a campus country; these collections are heavily used by the campus-based students; and, the distance programme timetable is concurrent with that of the campuses. All of these factors negatively impact on the capacity of the campus libraries, at the present time, to support distance learning.

Present practices

Committed to reduce and redress the disadvantages that distance students experience vis-a-vis on-campus students in respect to library and information services each of the campuses, constraints notwithstanding, has sought to do what it could in this regard.

As a general rule at all campuses, distance students who are able to go their campus of registration have access the library of that campus. Upon presentation of their identification these students enjoy library privileges similar to those extended to students registered for face-to-face programmes. These include library orientation, all Internet based services, reference and borrowing privileges.

MONA CAMPUS: A distance library services coordinator has been identified and given responsibility to facilitate this service. A brochure describing the services available to students has been produced and it is distributed with the information pack sent to students by the DEC on this campus. The coordinator also participates in the teleconference orientation programme for distance education students and discusses library services. The Coordinator and, on occasion, the University Librarian have visited the UWIDEC sites in Jamaica to investigate the ability and requirements of the sites to provide library services to the distance education programme. A core collection of recommended texts has been acquired and dispatched to each distance education site in Jamaica and those northern Caribbean countries for which the Mona campus has responsibility.

Students who are unable to visit the campus library are invited to submit their information needs/requests to the Resident Tutor or Site Coordinator for transmission by telephone, fax or email to a Distance Library Services Coordinator at the Mona Campus Main Library. Interlibrary loans and other responses are channeled through to the Site Coordinator and courier services are employed for document delivery to these students. Fines on late books and the cost of photocopies are the responsibility of the student.

ST. AUGUSTINE CAMPUS: A member of staff at both the Main Library and Medical Services Library (MSL) of this split facility campus has been assigned responsibility to coordinate distance library services. In addition to the main campus there are two other sites in Trinidad and one in Tobago, the sister island of this twin island state. Distance education students who use this campus' main library are limited to six items from the general collection and two items from the reserve collection for use in the library. In addition, there is also a special distance education collection. Items in this collection are loaned for three days.

The MSL, the other library of the St. Augustine campus, is committed to provide the necessary library and information service for the distance education courses being planned by this campus. Consequently, the MSL will provide information services for the DE postgraduate diploma in Family Medicine which is currently being planned. All stakeholders in this programme, including the library, participated in a planning meeting at which a specially developed diskette on proposed library services for medical distance learning was distributed and demonstrated. The diskette included a Web page which facilitated access to the library's personnel and resources as well as citations of appropriate WEB resources for the course to be pursued. The distance programmes in medicine to be delivered from this campus will be open to any physician in the Eastern Caribbean. This approach marks a new development in the delivery of library services to the distance students of the UWI.

CAVE HILL: Regrettably, this campus which is ideally located to serve the Eastern Caribbean, provides very limited services to distance learners in these islands. Advice on library development, inter library loans (limited to academic staff) and the verification of bibliographic details are the main services provided by this institution.

All of the campuses will be affected by the proposals of the University Librarian. The main features of this proposal are given in the section in apreceding section on the future.

STAFF INVOLVEMENT IN DISTANCE LIBRARIANSHIP

Recognising that library services to distance learners will be a major challenge of the UWI in the short term, several librarians have become involved in various aspects of distance library services. The research and publications of Watson are numerous and they have served as important professional guidelines for others embarking on distance library services in the Caribbean and beyond. Librarians from each of the campuses have also attended several courses on various aspects of distance education, including a course writing workshop with a view to garnering the appropriate skills to write distance education materials. These skills will be translated into developing orientation modules and information guides for distance students of the UWI. Additionally, all professional training experiences will redound to the benefit of distance library services from the UWI, particularly those which relate to IT based activities.

Recently two staff members, one from both the St. Augustine and Mona campus, have recently been in the United Kingdom on a work/study/research programme investigating various aspects of distance library services.

FUTURE PLANS

GENERAL: Presently, investigations are being carried out to identify Internet Databases which could be licensed for use on a UWI Instructional Web Site for new distance education graduate programmes to be developed with funding from the European Development Fund, LOME IV agreement. The current upgrade of the technical capacity and capability of the UWIDITE system will be deployed to improve the quality of library and information services available to distance learners in the Caribbean.

Recently, a policy document was prepared by the University Librarian to guide the development of UWI supported libraries in the NCCs. The document clearly articulates the need to provide quality library facilities and services at the SCSs in the NCCs. Ultimately, it is envisioned that library facilities in the SCSs will be of a standard that is comparable to that which is available to students pursuing the same courses on the campuses. In relation to the NCCs this document has the following specific recommendations:

SHORT TERM (1-3 YRS) recommendations cover staffing and equipping the SCSs in the NCCs in support of distance programmes. The document also proposes that a librarian be appointed at Cave Hill to coordinate library services in the NCCs in the Eastern Caribbean. Collection development in all NCC/SCSs is recommended. Also envisaged is that each library should have a computer dedicated to database development and another unit for Internet access.

MEDIUM TERM (4-7 YRS) recommendations state that the physical plant for the library in these centres should be upgraded as required to conform with contemporary standards. A Senior Library Assistant (Library Technician) should be appointed to each centre and staff training is deemed to be a crucial component of this phase.

LONG TERM (7+ YEARS) recommendations speak mainly to the development of the technological capabilities of each centre to permit access to digital resources on the campuses and elsewhere. The proposal recognises the importance of cooperation with other libraries in the NCCs so that wasteful duplication of effort could be avoided.

Thus, although library services to the distance learners of the UWI were not integral to such programmes from their inception, it is clear that the strategies and developments being recommended by the University Librarian will ensure that future distance learners of the UWI will be able to access a level of library and information services appropriate to their programme of learning.

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