

The Role of Electronic Library Service Supporting Distance Education Students, and Current Trends in Library Related Information Technology

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Universiti Sains Malaysia Distance Education Libraries in Brief

The School of Distance Education (SDE) was established in 1971. At the same time the Library (which was established in 1969) already played the main role as a catalyst to support the process of teaching and learning. For this purpose the Library made a positive step by signing a memorandum of understanding and agreements with public libraries (state libraries) and regional centers (including college and polytechnic libraries) to facilitate the provision of library services for the distance education program.

Currently, 6594 distance education students are using library facilities in more than 20 resource centers all over Malaysia. There are 15 libraries that house non-science collections which contains about 1200 items each respectively. Another 11 libraries hold the science collection with about 800 reading materials each. With the introduction of new discipline, recently the library has setup 5 more centers with a basic collection of more than 100 items for engineering students. In the regional center libraries the reading materials is managed by resident tutors while in public libraries they are managed by professional librarians.

At the main Library itself, there is a special collection for distance education students. The collection is called Distance Education Collection (DEC). This collection holds about 4000 reading materials in all disciplines. There are another two branch campuses with the same type of collection, one in Perak and Kelantan with about 1000 reading materials respectively.

Library Services

Borrowing Facilities

- Students are allowed to borrow 2 items from DEC and another 2 items from the main library collection. The borrowing privilege is either by coming to the library or by postal services (the same concept as Inter Library Loan).
- Borrowing facilities from the regional center libraries is limited to two items only for a two week period.
- During the Intensive Course (which is held in main campus at the end of every year), students are allowed to use all the facilities in the library. They are allowed to borrow all reading materials including from the media collection (ie cassettes, cd's, video recording, maps etc).
- Students are also allowed to renew their loans through telephone and via email.

Library Catalog

- Printed copy catalog is available in all libraries. This copy is produced by the main library and is updated regularly.

Photocopy Service

- The main library also provides photocopy service for articles or chapters of book via the postal services. The Library charges for making copies and the mailing cost of the required materials.

Library Instruction

- The Library from time to time provides the students of distance education information or training needed to effectively utilize the library resources and services. The Reference counter is open for them to get extra information. For new students, the library schedules a special orientation session which includes a 'library tour' and other information about its services.

Access to Electronic Resources

- Currently, library electronic resources can be easily accessed through the Internet. Through the library's homepage (<http://www.lib.usm.my>) service, the electronic resources such as OPAC (Online Public Access Catalog) is accessible from their home computer. The Library has begun a project to digitize some of the USM Press titles. Now users are allowed to browse electronic books (10 titles) and electronic public lectures (17 titles) and collections of past exam questions. Users also have access to Virtual Subject Libraries on electronic resources available in Internet and relevant to USM community. Up to this date 5 virtual subject libraries have been created. The selections of subject is done by librarians who have been trained to identify and evaluate quality resources related to the teaching, learning and research process.
- Online Reference Resources is also available for distance students. Although this local database is small but it very useful and it is a virtual concept of the reference counter.
- The Library also provides through its homepage access to course materials designed for distance learning. This project has been initiated recently and the number of such materials is expected to increase.

Future Plan

- Library is working on a joint understanding between academic libraries so that students are free to use the utilities and services or borrow materials from nearby libraries. There are a numbers of academic libraries distributed all around the country, and at least every states has one.
- Every library (in the Regional Center) will be linked with computer, so that all users can easily access to the current services provided by main library such as OPAC and Webpage.
- The Library will expand its electronic resources by developing in-house databases with content relevant to distance education.
- The Library will allow students to make electronic inquiries via the Internet.

Conclusion

- With the advancement of computer technology and the expansion of the USM computer network the Library will be able to services to long distance learning equal to what on-campus students receive.
- The Library is preparing itself for the new challenges and the need to reevaluate and revise its services to dovetail with the refinement of the distance education programs.

Acronyms/Abbreviations:

DEC =Distance Education Collection

OPAC = Online Public Access Catalog

SDE = School of Distance Education

USM = Universiti Sains Malaysia