

Library Services for Distance Learners in the Open University of Hong Kong

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The Open University of Hong Kong

The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) is the only local university recognised by the Hong Kong government which offers distance and open education to the Hong Kong community. It was established in 1989 as the Open Learning Institute offering degree, diploma, and certificate programmes in distance education mode in various subjects ranging from Arts and Social Science to Science and Technology. It was then renamed The Open University of Hong Kong in 1997. Since Hong Kong is small in terms of geographic area, the University runs on a one tier system with one headquarter and no regional centre.

Nevertheless, tutorials are held in places scattered all over Hong Kong to suit the needs of the students. Video programmes related to courses are broadcast to the students on Sunday mornings to enrich the contents of the courses. CD-ROM and IT technology are also applied to courses where appropriate.

The OUHK Library

The Library of the OUHK is situated in the Homantin campus of the university. Occupies 2,000 square metres, it comprises an AV centre, a Disabled Student Centre and a Language Laboratory. It provides study space for 304 students, and is open 84 hours per week. There are 25 full time library staff and 3 full time equivalent library casual workers serving 24,000 students and 1,400 staff and tutors. The Library operations have been fully automated using the DYNIX library system. It automates the acquisition, cataloguing, information services (online catalogue), serials, circulation and the reserved book room and has provided the automated library services since 1992.

There are three major collections in the Library: electronic, printed, and non-printed collection. There are about 1,000 electronic titles, which is equivalent to 500,000 printed volumes of materials; 45,000 volumes of printed materials; and about 1,700 titles of non-printed materials. The electronic collection could be viewed and used 24 hours a day via the Internet. Library users could access from home to electronic newspapers, journals, indexes and abstracts, various resources, and also the digitised examination papers by using the free dial-up kits provided by the Library. With the exception of reserved materials and reference materials, the printed collection is available for home loan by students, staff and tutors. The non-printed material is available for use in the Library.

To teach the users on how to make full use of the library services, orientation sessions, training classes and special literature search training classes are arranged at the beginning of each semester. Those users who cannot join the orientation or training could view the instructional videos prepared by the Library. Other services including photocopying service and interlibrary loan are also available.

Library Outreach Services

Nearly all OUHK students are full time workers, and hence the Library is keen on making various its services readily available to the users by means of all possible arrangements. Providing efficient library services to save the valuable time of our students is always a major goal of the Library.

Online Public Access Catalogue

The bilingual online public access catalogue has been made available to users since late 1992. Students could access the catalogue on campus. The catalogue supports both English and Chinese. Since not all students know the Chinese inputting method from the keyboard, a special device known as "hand writing pad" was installed and interfaced with the DYNIX library system. The pad could recognise the hand writing of users and transform it into computer recognised form. In addition, selected students who have enrolled in computer courses could dial into the then student electronic bulletin board at any time of the day for the online catalogue.

The CD ROM Network

A CD-ROM network was set up in 1995. Users could access the network for 30+ databases from their desktop anywhere in the campus. Remote access was made possible to every students by making use of a special software "PC Anywhere". While the system has been found to be popular, students are required to pay additional fees to purchase the client version of PC Anywhere before they could access the service remotely. This service is planned to be gradually phased out early next year with the establishment of the OUHK Electronic Library.

The Electronic Library

The above measures pave the way for the development of a fully-fledged electronic library in OUHK. The OUHK started its HK\$40 million Electronic Library Project in 1997. The first phase of the Project was completed in the Summer of 1998. The electronic library after the first phase provides round-the-clock remote access to library services from home and expanded the library collection from about 40,000 volumes of printed collections to about 500,000 volumes of equivalent electronic collections. It also offers access to library catalogues of the higher education institutions in Hong Kong and overseas, as well as to previous OUHK examination papers and additional readings. All active students, tutors, and staff could have access to the above services, free of charge, on campus and at home.

All electronic library services, including online catalogue, electronic reserve collection, the electronic databases and resources, and distance education institutions, were integrated through a single web based common user interface. A built-in English/Chinese search engine ensures a quick response to users' enquiries. By simple point and click, users can obtain the information without the need for in-depth computer knowledge.

In addition, a video server was established to provide on demand instructional videos over the low speed Internet to teach users on how to use the electronic library services at their own time and pace.

Other Services

Information technology was utilised as far as possible as long as it could offer convenience to the OUHK users. An Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS) was set up in the Summer of 98 for telephone renewal. It is a system using information technology and the renewal could be done without human intervention. Besides, a CD-ROM on how to use the electronic library and campus library was developed for the users to extend the user education programme to the home of the students.

Co-operation with Public Libraries

The Library signed a memorandum with the public library system in Hong Kong in 1990 to make course materials and set books available in 15 public libraries scattered over Hong Kong. The online catalogue of OUHK Library has also been available to students in the major public library branches since 1993. Since DYNIX is being used by the public library in Hong Kong, the staff in the public library can easily handle enquires relate to OUHK OPAC searching without difficulty, which facilitates co-operation between the OUHK Library and public libraries and ensures quality support to the OUHK students.

When the public libraries started their Internet service in late 1998, linkage to the OUHK electronic library was permanently established on the public libraries' web page for the convenience of and easy access by the OUHK students. In other words, students could access OUHK electronic library services in over 40 public libraries equipped with Internet stations. Nevertheless, the service is presently in a restricted manner due to security reasons and contract conditions imposed by the database/resource vendors.

Future Plans

The provision of efficient electronic library services will continue to be one of the major concerns of the University to enable the learning environment to cope with changes in course delivery methods and to meet the demand of the community that university graduates have the necessary Internet skills. To build up a collection which is directly relate to the OUHK programmes, digitisation of materials on areas where electronic materials are not readily available on the market would be necessary. An e-text centre will be built up to maintain a balanced library collection.

At present, the electronic databases and resources are mainly text based to suit the slow data transmission speed of the modem. With the availability of the high speed Internet and the intention of the Hong Kong government to open up the telecommunications market, posting up multimedia information on the web for remote access would be possible on the broadband network in the near future. The latest information technology will also be adopted to allow user access to full electronic library services from public libraries without losing the security control.

On the other hand, more information literacy programmes will be developed to promote the use of the electronic library. This is to make the users aware of the services and to tie the services tightly with the study and leaning of the students.

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