MEETING THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS: THE UPM EXPERIENCE

Mrs. Kamariah Abdul Hamid
Chief Librarian
Universiti Putra Malaysia
E-mail: kah@lib.upm.edu.my
http://www.upm.edu.my

Introduction

Universiti Putra Malaysia traces its origins to the School of Agriculture which began in 1931 as the training centre for officers of the Department of Agriculture. The School was declared the College of Agriculture in 1942, and later became the University of Agriculture (Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM)) in 1971 with the merger of the College and the Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Malaya. UPM started its academic programmes in July 1973 with three founding faculties: the Faculty of Agriculture, Faculty of Forestry, and Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science with a total number of 1,559 students. On 3 April 1997, the University was renamed as Universiti Putra Malaysia.

UPM is currently the largest science and technology university in the country with the student enrolment of 35,000, including 8,700 distance education students. With its 13 faculties, 2 graduate schools, and 2 institutes, UPM offers degree and diploma programmes, and several graduate study programmes at both the master and doctoral levels. Programmes offered include agriculture, forestry, veterinary medicine, animal science, basic sciences, resource economics and agribusiness, engineering, environmental science, education, extension and continuing education, business management, computer science, human development, food science, biotechnology, accounting and modern languages.

As an institution of higher learning, the University strives towards achieving the highest level of credibility for its academic programmes as reflected in its mission statement which states:

To be a leading centre of learning and research contributing not only towards human advancement and discovery of knowledge but also to the creation of wealth and nation building.

Over the years the University has established strong links with other academic and research institutions, as well as with industry. This ongoing collaboration allows the University to fine-tune its programmes and courses to meet the needs of both the national and international marketplace. Staff and students have benefited from this interaction.
which has helped to prepare them for the challenges of an intellectually demanding job environment.

Distance Education

UPM offers distance education through its Institute for Distance Education and Learning (IDEAL) which was officially launched on 26 June 1995 by the Honourable Minister of Education. It aims to provide the working population of Malaysia with quality degree and non-degree programmes through distance education and open learning, as seen in its mission that states:

**IDEAL is committed to democratise education by ensuring equity of access to and success in higher education and lifelong learning.**

To achieve the mission, IDEAL offers courses that cater for advance education and career enrichment for the public who cannot attend a formal schooling in the University owing to constrain of work schedules. IDEAL offers flexible mode of delivery to enable those with personal and work constraint to pursue further education. In this way, the Institute is sharing the University expertise to offer lifelong education to the Malaysian society to match the capability of its people to the growing demand of the fast industrialising nation.

Programmes Offered

UPM offers a total of 13 programmes through distance education, namely:

1. Master of Science in Corporate Communication.
3. Bachelor of Arts (English Language).
4. Bachelor of Arts (Malay Language and Linguistics).
5. Bachelor of Communication.
6. Bachelor of Computer Science.
7. Bachelor of Education (Guidance and Counselling).
8. Bachelor of Education (Teaching of B. Malaysia as the first language).
9. Bachelor of Education (Teaching of English as the second language).
10. Bachelor of Science (Hons.) majoring in Mathematics.
11. Bachelor of Science (Hons.) majoring in Statistics.
12. Bachelor of Science with Education (Hons.) majoring in Mathematics.
13. Bachelor of Science with Education (Hons.) majoring in Statistics.

Language of Instruction

Most of the undergraduate programmes use Bahasa Malaysia as the language of instruction, while English language is also used for the Bachelor of Education (TESL) and
several other science and technology based programmes. The graduate programmes use the English language as the main language of instruction.

Registration and Orientation

All candidates offered places for distance education are required to register as UPM students. Registration is twice a year, May and November semesters respectively. The registered students are required to attend an orientation programme, where a briefing is given relating to course requirements, assignments, examinations, programme structure, academic guidance and distance learning. The students are also introduced to their respective course lecturers.

Teaching and Learning

The distance education programme emphasises on individual study which allows flexibility for the working community. To facilitate students in pursuing this individual study, several support services are provided. Students are given learning modules which outline the course contents, assignments and course requirements together with several references that need to be read. They are also given the opportunity to attend face-to-face sessions with their lecturers at least twice a semester.

Learning Centres

To enhance facilities for distance education students, several learning centres are provided for undergraduate programmes throughout the country. Activities at these learning centres include discussion and tutorial sessions, reference facilities and examinations. Tutors are appointed to guide the students and a supervisor is appointed to be responsible for the administration of the centre. Besides the learning centre in UPM, other centres are situated in 20 strategic towns such as Alor Setar, Banting, Bintulu, Ipoh, Johor Bahru, Kota Bharu, Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan, Kuching, Kulim, Lumut, Melaka, Muar, Pulau Pinang, Seremban, Shah Alam, Taiping and Tawau. New learning centres are developed as and when deemed necessary.

Library and Information Services

The UPM library is centrally situated in the academic complex and has a floor area of approximately 17,652 square meters and a seating capacity of about 2,000. It had developed its collection in agriculture and related fields since its early beginnings to meet the information needs of its clientele. As the University expanded and introduced new programmes and established new faculties, collection development changed its focus accordingly, not only in terms of subject areas but also the levels, to cater for the increasing postgraduate programmes. The library has a collection of approximately 450,000 volumes, current journal subscriptions of 2,133 titles, 60,000 units of audiovisual materials, and a total of CD-ROM databases.
The library’s mission is to provide excellent resources, facilities and services in fulfilling the information needs of users in their learning, teaching, research and consultancy activities in the University. To realise this mission, the library provides the following major services:

a. Liaison Librarians – a team of faculty liaison librarians takes care of the information needs of students and academic staff of the different faculties. They provide advice on effective ways of seeking information. Besides, they also provide on request customized courses to final year and postgraduate students. One librarian is specially assigned to provide services to distance learners.

b. Loan service – an undergraduate student is allowed to borrow 4 books for 2 weeks (3 weeks for distance learners), while a graduate student may borrow 15 books for 30 days. Journals and audiovisual materials are to be used in the library only. Loans may be made by post, whereby the students pay the postal charges.

c. Reference service – the library maintains a professionally staffed Reader Advisory Service throughout its opening hours. Users needing assistance concerning the facilities and services or advice on information retrieval systems may seek guidance from the Reader Advisory Desk. Distance learners may make reference enquiries through the telephone, telefax or e-mail.

d. Information search service – besides being offered to students and academic staff, this service is also offered to individuals from other organisations at a nominal charge. Distance learners request for this service through ordinary mail or e-mail.

e. Interlibrary loan/Document delivery service – open to academic staff and graduate students on campus. Distance learners may request for photocopies of journal articles or book chapters through e-mail, and pay for the photocopy and delivery costs.

f. Information literacy program – new students are introduced to the library and its services and facilities through a special library orientation program at the beginning of each semester. Ongoing user education programmes on information searching techniques are offered to all categories of users. The library has a training room equipped with 30 microcomputers linked to the campus network and the Internet for this purpose. Distance learners go through this program as part of their orientation programme and also during their face-to-face sessions on campus.

g. Access to local online databases on a subscription basis, such as:

- NSTP Online - a service offered by the New Straits Times Press (Malaysia), which provides information from the daily papers published by the Press. It also contains special databases on companies, individual personalities, foreign countries as well as the
different states, and articles from the journal Malaysian Business, an NSTP publication.

- PALMOILIS - a database developed by the Palm Oil Research Institute of Malaysia (PORIM) that contains information on oil palm available at the Institute, including recipes using palm oil, PORIM’s profile, and other host databases.

- SIRIMLINK – a database developed by the Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM) covering technology and technological developments such as standards, quality procedures, patents, and other data related to commerce and technical issues.

h. Access to foreign online databases through the Internet by subscribing to EBSCOhost on the World Wide Web, Emerald Intelligence and Full Text Electronic Library, and Digital Dissertations. Being IP-address-driven, these databases are accessible through any PC on the campus-wide network.

Computer and IT Application

The first form of computerisation that the library experienced was when it participated in a cooperative cataloguing project together with the other university libraries and the national library, known as MALMARC (Malaysian Machine Readable Cataloguing) in 1979. A by-product of the project was the COM (Computer Output on Microfilm) catalogue, which was produced in the microfiche format. The library then had two forms of catalogue - the traditional card catalogue which contained records of books processed prior to 1979, and the microfiche catalogue of books processed since 1979.

The second half of the 1980’s marked a new era in the library when it started using computers and other IT applications, and had its own computer system installed. An initial development in the use of computers was in 1985 when the library bought the first microcomputer which was subsequently used for online access to foreign databases, namely DIALOG databases in Palo Alto, California through MAYPAC (Malaysian Packet Switched Network). This service soon became popular with the academic staff and researchers. Another development was when the library launched an information search service using CD-ROM. The library had been chosen as one of the test sites for evaluating CABI’s databases on CD-ROM, to test the effectiveness of CD-ROM as a medium in information dissemination. It proved to be effective and successful, and the library soon started subscribing to several other CD-ROM databases. A total of 10 microcomputers, each with a multi-drive CD-ROM unit, are currently provided and located in the public area for easy access to these databases. A CD-ROM networking system was also installed in late 1994 but this was confined only to those CD-ROMs used by the staff in technical processing units as these CD-ROMs may be used on a Local Area Network (LAN) at no
additional charge of a LAN fee. The cost of multiuser licences for the other CD-ROMS are a little too much for the library.

The Hewlett-Packard minicomputer was installed in July 1987, and the period July - December 1987 saw the development of an in-house database on Management and Utilisation of Wastes (MUWIC) using MINISIS, a database management software that was received gratis from IDRC. The library then became the Regional Information Centre for Management and Utilisation of Wastes, a joint project with the Faculty of Engineering, funded by IDRC. Other in-house databases were soon developed using MINISIS, namely AGRIMAL (Malaysian agricultural information since 1900), MAKMAL (information on subjects other than agriculture pertaining to Malaysia), FISHE (fish health and diseases and other aquatic life in Asia), FAMILY (database on family and family development), HOUSING (database on housing development and research to support the Housing Research Centre in the Faculty of Engineering), and SMI (database on small and medium-size industries).

The library uses Virginia Tech Library System (VTLS), which was installed in January 1988, by which time the library catalogue in the MALMARC system totalled about 60,000 records. These records were immediately transferred into VTLS. The remaining 35,000 records in the card catalogue were subsequently input and 16 months later, the VTLS online catalogue was ready to be used. The circulation of books also went online at the same time, in July 1989. This marked the end of the card catalogue which was immediately taken away from the public area. VTLS implementation went on smoothly and the library thus has a completely integrated system for its housekeeping functions of acquisitions, cataloguing, serials control and circulation. About 40 terminals and 90 microcomputers are currently linked to MINISIS and VTLS.

The University installed the campus wide network with the ATM backbone in 1995, and has enabled the library catalogue to be on the Internet ever since. The catalogue is directly accessible through the library’s homepage, which also provides links to other sources of information on the Internet, both local and international. The academic staff can also make requests for purchase of books and interlibrary loans through the library homepage. The library has recently installed a network printer to which requests for printing can be made from any PC on the network in the library. Users are now able to print from the Internet using this network printer.

Future Developments

The current subscription to online full-text databases as mentioned earlier is a step towards the development of a digital library. The library hopes to expand its coverage of bibliographic and textual databases so that faculty and students will have access to the key literatures they need in a larger variety of disciplines. The major databases in science, information technology, engineering, medicine, and social sciences are among those under consideration. The library will also consider other types of electronic sources of information such as multimedia CD-ROMs, videos in digital format, geographic information systems, etc.
Besides continuing to develop more in-house databases in the various disciplines offered in UPM, the library is planning to digitize the University’s publications into a searchable database. The plan to endeavour in the digitization of materials was mooted a couple of years ago, but was handicapped by shortage of funds and staff. A decision has been made to digitize at the outset only UPM publications so as to avoid any problems that may arise with the copyright issue. A pilot project is currently underway to digitize the theses collection.

The information technology infrastructure in the library will be upgraded so as to enhance the provision of electronic services through the network. The library will also set up multimedia laboratories equipped with new technology computers for the use of students to access various forms of electronic resources locally or over the network. Video streaming facilities will also be installed to cater for digital video viewing on demand.

As the digital library becomes a reality in UPM, staff training will be increasingly important. Ongoing training on current library operations and new technologies will be provided to staff at all levels. When the digital library is implemented, users will have the opportunity to learn about and utilise the library’s resources and services with minimal physical contact with the library facilities. Services will include instructional tools, access to online full-text journals, interlibrary loan, document delivery, current awareness services, as well as electronic service request forms. These will definitely enhance the library services to UPM distant learners.