Library services to distance education students: dealing with the challenges

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Introduction

• A university librarian must understand

• the students
• their environment
• their information needs
Background

• In 2016 NWU had 30 000 distance students
• 22 000 studied education (NWU, 2017:16)
• Library services must adapt to facilitate these students and their particular needs
NWU Distance Students

• Reasons for studying through distance
  • working people
  • cannot afford to give up their jobs
  • improve current qualifications
  • live far from the institution

• Study centres across the country
  • offer study books provided by the university
  • these books are rarely used
  • reason may be distance and lack of time
Barriers

- A study done by Geduld (2013:118) specifically with BEd Honours students at the NWU identifies various barriers these students face.

**TIME**

- Conflicting responsibilities
  - school activities
  - community responsibilities
- Activities clash with contact sessions
- They do not have enough time for studies
Barriers

LANGUAGE

• English – language of instruction and communication
  • Ferreira and Venter (2011:81) states that communication problems that distance students experience in SA “is worsened by eleven official languages”.

• SA’s language politics not for librarians

• Deal with the practicalities of service
Barriers

• Non-native English speakers spend time on interpretation
• Personal contact is best but clear explanations help
  • Geduld (2013:121) recommends that “instructions in study guides should not be ambiguous, vague or verbose, and beyond the language comprehension level of students”.
• Also true for information literacy training
• Language must not be a hindrance
Barriers

• CONFIDENCE
• SELF-REGULATED LEARNING SKILLS

• NWU distance education students
  • Are mostly full-time teachers
  • Are older than the average contact student
  • Do not believe in their own abilities to study
  • Feel that they are “too old” for studying
  • Completed their initial training during a time when education was teacher-centred
  • Lack sufficient self-regulated learning skills
    (Geduld, 2013:120)
Barriers

• INFORMATION LITERACY

• All students are expected to have the same level of information literacy

BUT

• distance students rely on internet for all information sources

• contact students have access to library staff in person
Barriers

• Older distance students
  • lack the computer literacy of the younger generation
  • do not know computer terminology
  • lack even basic keyboard skills
Computer literacy – a common problem

• Not only an NWU problem
  • Naidoo (2012:34) states that a large number of South African students “are introduced to computers and Internet technology for the first time when they enter these institutions and thus grapple with basic computer skills.”
  • A study done in the USA and published in 2016 mentions lack of computer literacy as one factor that contributes to higher drop-out rates of distance students (Buck, 2016:139).
Library-Faculty cooperation

• Challenges are numerous
• Cooperation is crucial
  • (Carrico & Neff, 2012:200) states that a librarian will have better access to and get to know distance students and their needs better if the teaching faculty include them in the teaching process.
• Academic staff explain how to do research
• Librarians assist with access
Students and shortcuts

• Path of least effort
• Librarians expected to do research
• Single, perfect source
  • In a study done by Lewis and Contrino (2016:26) with distance education students it is observed that some students choose a topic, find sources they think fit in with the topic and use these. They do not think critically about various sources to create their own arguments and express ideas in their own words.
• Lack of critical thinking – plagiarism
Knowing Google does not ensure success

- Google and academic databases – different search methods
- Effective searching:
  - Do not merely type question
  - Identify search terms
- Technical proficiency – no guarantee for effective search for academic e-resources
The university librarian

- Role of university librarians
  - Self-regulated learning and critical thinking
  - Access to library services and electronic resources
  - Save time
  - Quality information – use it

Librarians must realise:

The availability of a good library website does not mean all students know how to benefit from it
Librarians know too much

• University librarians
  • know the world of information literacy
  • sometimes overestimate students

• Onhwakpor (2017:279) mentions that academic librarians should have certain computer and information skills if they are to do their work effectively. The problem is that they assume that students have the same skills and tend to make training too difficult for distance students.
Planning a training session

• NWU Education Sciences Library & NWU UODL
• BEd Honours distance students
• Interactive white board session
• Needs of group:
  • simplified training
  • limited computer knowledge
  • barriers
  • practical demonstration
  • immediate information needs
Introduction to training

• Hands-on training demonstration
• Simple information search
• Explained
  • save time
  • find quality information quickly
• EbscoHost – wide scope & user-friendly search screen
• Libguides require computer literacy – therefore not used as starting point
Hands-on training demonstration

• Examples taken from real assignments
• Training in English
• Instructions unambiguous
• Class not rushed
• Ample question time
• Staff member available to translate questions
Demonstrating a search

• Uncomplicated search
• Detail included
  • quotation marks and brackets
  • synonyms
• On-screen options
  • select different fields
  • limit dates
  • search for full text sources
• Search done beforehand to ensure satisfactory outcome
Interpreting search results

• Critical thinking skills
• Explained how to
  • evaluate article
  • read an abstract
  • interpret an abstract

• Discussed importance of
  • evaluating many abstracts before
  • selecting the best articles
Interaction

• No questions were asked
• Students embarrassed to admit lack of understanding
• Invited to contact university librarian by e-mail
  • Asking them to send a question in writing, forces students to analyse and interpret an assignment
Recommendations

• No single recipe
• Understand and reach out
• Keep the barriers in mind
• Adapt strategies
• Cooperate
• Market services
Conclusion

• University librarians must train people to help themselves

• Make a difference in lives of increasing number of distance students
Bibliography


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