Educational Roles of Academic Librarians: A Case of the Distance Education Doctoral Degree Programme Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand

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Abstract

This study explores the expected educational roles of STOU librarians in supporting Doctoral degree programme and proposes certain guidelines to enhance their roles. The literature review is supplemented by qualitative research consisting of semi-structured interviews with six purposive faculty members from four schools offering / going to offer Doctoral degree programmes in the academic year 2009 and six academic librarians who are involved with the Doctoral degree programmes. The interviewing guidelines was used as a research instrument to collect information. Findings and implications from the study showed that academic librarians in the distance education system were expected to play the key roles as faculty partners, instructional librarians, liaison librarians, and practitioner- researchers. The guidelines for faculty-librarian partnership with collaborative effort of all parties concerned especially librarians , faculty members and university policy makers, were proposed to enhance academic librarians' roles and for the success of the Doctoral programme via distance education.

Keywords: Aacademic librarians' roles; distance education librarians' roles; faculty librarians partnership.

Introduction

Academic libraries perform an indispensable function in the educational process. This function has grown in importance by virtue of the current focus on educational reform and the new learning environment associated with information and communication technologies especially digital technologies. The role of the academic library is to support the University's programmes, to work with the faculty, and to instruct/ guide students in using the collection in order to conduct research and succeed in class. (Bielema and others 2007: 340).The literature strongly supports the importance of the academic library as an integral component of the success of the higher education programme and an indicator of the quality of a higher education institution of both traditional and distance education system. In the digital environment, non-traditional study having rapidly become a major element in higher education, e-learning has been introduced in all fields and at all levels of education – challenging educators especially distance educators and librarians worldwide. The educational role of academic librarians in the distance learning environment is considered of high importance.

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), the eleventh state university of Thailand, was the first open university and the first true distance teaching university in Thailand and in Southeast Asia to use the distance education system. STOU through its twelve schools, offers Certificate, Bachelor, Master and Doctoral degree programme. STOU has been developed in harmony with the information age and the national educational reform. "STOU Plan 2000" and " STOU Graduate Distance Education System" gear more towards computer-based, resource-based and learner-centered orientation.

This has transformed the traditional distance education and increasingly been more and more integrated in the curriculum both in the course content and the teaching and learning process especially at the graduate level, to cope with the vision of the university towards e-university and to promote an effective educational environment in the digital age and enhance learners' new competencies and skills.

STOU's Doctoral distance education system, follows "STOU Graduate Distance Education System" and allows Doctoral students to study independently, using study guides, under the guidance of an instructor, e-learning and physical contact to facilitate the teaching/ learning process. Many academic activities for Doctoral students including orientation for new graduate students, academic seminars, intensive seminars, independent study are also provided. At the Doctoral degree programmes, e-learning, resource-based and research- based teaching/ learning are being used intensively. This is the major challenge

facing librarians which inevitably affects librarians' roles in supporting the Doctoral degree via distance education system. Findings from the study of Sacchanand (2002) showed that STOU librarians' existing roles are primarily that of information specialists/ providers. There was a consensus or an integration perspective that STOU librarians should expand their roles or play new roles as teachers/ instructional partners/ facilitators and as researchers. This involves reconceptualising their roles and their attitudes to the roles of librarians in the new environment. As STOU has been moving towards offering more Doctoral degree programmes in various areas including information science, the educational roles of academic librarians are seen to be more expanding and more challenging . As library and librarian are key components for the success of the programme, the researcher as chair of STOU Doctoral degree programme in information science which is going to be first offered from the second semester of the academic year 2009 (December 2009) would like to explore the expected educational roles of academic librarians in supporting Doctoral degree programme and to propose guidelines to enhance librarians' roles which are expected to contribute significantly to the sustainable development and success of Doctoral distance education programme at STOU.

Objective of the study

The purposes of this research were to explore the expected educational roles of STOU librarians in supporting Doctoral degree programme and to propose the suitable guidelines to enhance STOU academic librarians' roles.

Review of literature

The library literature is replete with research and studies on educational roles of academic librarians and it is evident that academic librarians' role is vital. Revill (2001: 332) reviewed academic librarians teaching roles and argued that the roles for academic librarians envisaged by the authors have always been the ideal intention. Resource-based learning, lecturers and librarians as "*facilitators of learning*" and similar concepts can all trace their history back to the 1960s at least. Librarians, at least in the UK, have long regarded their proper role as being that of partners of academic staff and as facilitators of learning in a research model, resource based learning environment, rather than merely as providers of information services in a "supporting" role simply reaching to over demands. Librarians have particular attitudes towards information use and skills within learning yet this can not be separated entirely from subject content which is the jealously regarded province of academic staff. The emphasis was that librarians must become more like faculty in order to fulfill their role and potential, demonstrating their ability to contribute at all levels in the educational process.

Academic librarians' efforts to improve their work as teachers were also explored by Walter (2005) and Wilson (2008). Walter (2005) provided a framework for future action by teaching librarians and by library administrators committed to supporting the professional development of librarians as teachers and to promoting the instructional role of the academic library. Whereas, Wilson (2008) showed that the academic library profession has been poorly understood by students and faculty. Study participants believed that many of their campus colleagues were either unaware of what they did, or were misinformed by popular stereotypes of librarians. The role of teacher spilled over into the other roles of the librarian, i.e., reference service, collection development, etc. The importance of collegial and administrative support is critical to the ability to focus on work as a teacher. Hook and Stowell (2003) wrote that a library school education does not always prepare librarians to teach information literacy skills to students or to talk constructively with faculty. Thus, on-going training is needed for librarians to develop and practice these skills.

As for subject librarians' roles, Pinfield (2001) presented that subject librarians are performing new roles and adopting new ways of working. Areas where the changing role of subject librarians can be specifically identified include: greater emphasis on liaison with users; advocacy of the collections; adopting new roles; dealing with user enquiries in new ways; working with technical staff; selecting electronic library materials; carrying out more information skills training; having a greater involvement in the implementation of educational technology; team working and project working.

In the distance education system, educational roles of librarians have long been talked about as a key factor for the success of the distance learning programme. *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services (2008)* issued by Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), had been concerned for ensuring the delivery of equivalent library services and information resources to college and university students, faculty, and other personnel in remote settings. The teaching role the library staff have taken on one of the biggest changes we have seen (Braun 2002, p.46). McManus (1998, p.435) further stated that if librarians and libraries don't become pedagogical players in the information and education enterprise, then turning to the Internet as the first source for information will make sense to more and more students and university administrators. The educational roles of academic librarians are expanding especially in teaching library-information skills; collaborative teaching/learning processes and curriculum development with faculty; and research investigation. The literature review showed that information literacy is more important in the escalating complicated/ complex on-line environment. Information

literacy skill are survival skills; a desirable outcome of higher education; key competency being the foundation of a literate society. Academic librarians are uniquely positioned to foster the development of information literacy skills (Brown 1999, p.427).

In the online environment, Bielema and others (2007) designed a new distance education course with an emphasis on a collaborative effort among faculty and librarians, using the University of Missouri, St. Louis as a case study. The graduate online course in Education involved librarians in a collaborative team relationship. Weekly meetings were scheduled by the Education faculty member with her collaborators. The course syllabus was shared to give librarian's clues to the relevant databases and students' need for information. The research partners' assignment was collaboratively designed and expanded to include a librarian-partner in each small group. Librarians were added to the course management system as teaching assistants for the course and were accessible via email or in the discussion group. The librarians stepped forward to locate current literature and uploaded several full text articles as additional readings because librarian had followed the discussions and understood the context. Librarians assumed online "course librarians" positions, significant responsibilities could be shifted to their support, and new resources could be made available to students with considerable ease – particularly via library electronic resources, databases, and electronic communication. New methods, new technologies, new roles and responsibilities for faculty and librarians were described. Implications and recommendations were suggested for the potential of collaborations among faculty member, librarians, and instructional designers, more generally, in the highest education community.

In the Thai distance education context, specifically at STOU which is the largest distance learning providers in the country, Sacchanand (2002b) found that STOU librarians more generally performed roles associated with being information specialists/ providers, such as information searching/retrieval; providing library and information services; and information consultant/reference assistance and more rarely performed their roles as teachers/ instructional partners/ facilitators and as researchers. In terms of the roles related to teachers/instructors or instructional partners, the librarians would be expected to teach information literacy skills and be partners with faculty in course development. As researchers, STOU librarians at times support research of others but could be also expected to be practitioner-researchers. Factors that were identified to facilitate STOU librarians' roles in supporting the distance education system for graduate students were the STOU philosophy which emphasizes service-orientation and the university's recognition of the importance of library and librarians (represented by the ODI director) as

one component of the university's administrative and educational committees. Major factors that were identified as possibly hindering librarians' roles included STOU centralized administrative system , technological infrastructure and network of the university not well developed; insufficient investment in technological infrastructure of the university, librarians' status is not equivalent to teaching faculty; the partnership between faculty and librarians is not satisfactory and has no formal policy on which to build on-going relationships and lack of continuing professional development for librarians. A liaison librarian was recommended to be assigned to serve as a contact person for each school. This will facilitate fast communication, better relationships between the faculty and the librarians, and the librarians and graduate students.

Research Methodology

The research study was conducted at STOU. The literature review was supplemented by qualitative research consisting of semi-structured interviews with six purposive faculty members from four schools offering/going to offer Doctoral degree programmes in the academic year 2009: namely the School of Education, the School of Business Administration, the School of Communication Arts and the School of Liberal Arts and six librarians who are involved with the Doctoral degree programmes. The interviewing guideline was used as a research instrument to collect information on their idea about the importance and benefits of STOU librarians to the Doctoral degree programme, the expected roles that librarians should play, factors that hinder or facilitate librarians' roles, and suggested guidelines to enhance librarians' roles. Qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis.

Findings

Data gathered from STOU faculty members and librarians through this study showed the following findings:

STOU faculty members who are involved with the Doctoral degree programmes considered academic librarians are important and their roles are crucial in supporting the Doctoral degree programme via distance education system. In terms of the roles related to Doctoral programmes, faculty members expected librarians to perform these roles: provide library orientation to new students especially on library information retrieval skills, analysis, synthesis and documentation; advise students on library research and literature reviews on specialized subject; work with faculty in collection development, provide resources and services and develop web portal and recommend suggested readings for all course modules in the Doctoral degree programmes. Librarians are expected to provide library orientation to the newcomer students and advise students along with students' study.

Faculty-librarian partnership, together with the idea of liaison librarians or course librarians assigned to each course in the Doctoral degree programme is strongly supported by faculty members to serve as key contact person and to facilitate teaching /learning process. Faculty members gave suggestions to STOU higher policy makers at the university level to have clear policy on assigning formal roles to librarians as liaison librarians or course librarians in the Doctoral programme to support the teaching/learning process and system.

Faculty member perceived factors that hindered STOU librarians to be members of the course module production and management team at the Doctoral degree level were librarians' qualification which do not meet the standard set by Commission for Higher Education of the Ministry of Education (faculty members at the Doctoral degree level should get Doctoral degree in that specialized area or related field); the lack of subject knowledge of librarians, and also librarians' knowledge and competencies as there were also faculty members who tend to see themselves to be experts in content as well as familiar with specialized information resources and services.

However, faculty members expected STOU librarians not to be merely information providers, but should be also proactive and play more critical roles in supporting the distance education system, especially in the resourced-based teaching and learning orientation. Thus, librarians should also develop their professional competencies in specialized subject areas that are offering at the Doctoral degree level, as well as teaching and learning and research, particularly research into users' information needs, use, behavior and others.

As for the librarians, STOU librarians perceived that librarians have important roles in the Doctoral degree programme. Librarians expected to be faculty partners in the teaching/learning process within librarians' status should be recognized as experts in information resources. In addition to the traditional profession roles of academic librarians as information providers supporting Doctoral degree programme, e.g. collection development, reference and information services, librarians should pay more attention to the educational roles; as instructional librarians to teach information literacy skills, to work with faculty in planning the study guides; and as information consultants to students about resource on their assignments/work. However, one librarian still perceived her role merely as information providers /specialist and not teaching role. Factors prevented librarians to play proactive roles as perceived by librarians since they were not much supported by the university, no clear and formal policy relevant to the educational roles of STOU librarians and no formal recognition of their educational roles at the university level. Some faculty-members do not fully support the resource-based and research-based teaching/learning process, e.g. they did not pay much attention in giving recommendation to students to use the library resources and to librarians as information professionals who will support students' study. Some faculty members themselves are not familiar with specialized resources / databases and this affects students' learning. In addition, librarians find that they themselves have limitations in subject content and in their qualifications as none of them got Doctoral degree programme and very few got master degree in subject areas other than library and information science. Moreover, librarians inferior status in the university administrative line, being treated as supporting staff (according to the Ministry of Education government employee personnel management system) were still their problems. Librarians are in favor of the idea of faculty partner and liaison librarian which they think will help develop their close relationship and understanding with faculty, and develop librarians' competencies and roles.

Discussions and Implications

Based on the literature review and findings, discussion and implications,a set of recommendations were formulated as follows:

Importance of Librarians in Doctoral Degree Programme Via Distance Education

Findings from STOU faculty members and librarians are in favor of librarians' roles in supporting Doctoral degree programme via distance learning. This is supported by literature review especially *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services (2008)* which delineated the elements necessary for institutions of higher education to support the distance learning programme and to meet the needs of the faculty, students and academic support staff. The *Guidelines* assume many important precepts which shape the roles of librarians and the management of distance learning library services.

Librarians' Expected Roles in Supporting the Doctoral Degree Programme

Librarians' expected roles in supporting the Doctoral degree programme should be faculty partners, instructional librarians, liaison librarians, practitioner-researchers.

Librarians as faculty partners: Faculty-librarian relationship should be enhanced and put at the high level policy. This is to facilitate the teaching/ learning process. As facilitators of learning, (Bielema and others 2007: 340; Revill 2001: 332), librarians should be involved in supporting different processes/ activities of the Doctoral distance education system. According to the *Standards* (2008), the librarian-administrator should participate in the curriculum development process and in course planning for distance learning to ensure that appropriate library resources and services are available; works collaboratively with teaching faculty in distance-delivered programmes to integrate information literacy into courses and programmes in order to foster lifelong learning skills.

Librarians as *instructional librarians or teaching librarians:* Literature show that instructional or teaching roles of academic librarians are among the biggest changes and important roles (Braun 2002: 46; McManus 1998: 435; Walter 2005). Changes in higher education and the distance education environment present numerous educational responsibilities to academic librarians and have given them opportunities to take a more central role in the distance education process even without the faculty status. The teaching roles of academic librarians in the distance education environment includes various activities, not only face-to-face teaching, the development of online, web-based learning courses, self-training packages on information retrieval from specialized subject databases. According to the *Standards* (2008), the library must provide information literacy instruction programmes to the distance learning community in accordance with the ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. The attainment of lifelong learning skills through general bibliographic and information literacy instruction in academic libraries is a primary outcome of higher education, and as such, must be provided to all distance learning students. However, as it is hypothesized that the Doctoral students were information literate students as they study at the highest level, the librarians' teaching role turn to be more as information consultant.

Librarians as liaison librarians: Liaison relationships involve communicating with faculty, graduate students and undergraduates. Effective relations with teaching staff are fundamental. Fostering effective liaison relationships in an academic library remains relevant and can help guide liaisons in many important respect (Glynn and Wu 2003). Findings of this study from both faculty and librarians and literature review (e.g. Pinfield 2001; Sacchanand 2002) supported the idea of liaison librarians. Both parties, faculty and librarians, desired a high level of collaboration. Liaison librarians will help develop closer linkage between faculty and librarians, and librarians and students; and in turn will help develop librarians' knowledge and competencies, especially in subject resources. Technology has dramatically increased the amount of information available in libraries and greatly facilitated its dissemination. It therefore creates opportunities for enhancing liaison relationships (Glynn and Wu 2003). However, the suggestion which was already proposed by Sacchanand (2002) still does not come true at STOU, may be due to the lack of recognition of the liaison librarians roles at the university level and the university community.

Librarians as practitioner – researcher: as faculty members recommended that STOU librarians should develop their competencies in teaching and learning and research, particularly research into users' information needs, user behavior and so on. This research role was highlighted *in the Standards for Distance Learning Library Services (2008)* that "The librarian-administrator regularly surveys distance learning library users to monitor and assess both the appropriateness of their use of services and resources and the degree to which needs are being met and skills acquired" and this was supported by Bielema and other (2007: 340).

Proposed Guidelines to Enhance STOU Academic Librarians' Roles

Based on the literature review, findings and discussion, some guidelines for faculty-librarian partnership with collaborative effort of all parties concerned: librarians, faculty members, and university higher policy makers were suggested to enhance STOU academic librarians' roles as follows:

- Librarians are more perceive and perform their educational roles, especially as faculty partners, instructional librarians, liaison librarians/course librarians, practitioner- researchers to support the Doctoral degree programmes in the digital environment proactively.

- Librarians are involved in a collaborative team relationship as "course librarians" position or also "online course librarians" position This is to cope with the online learning movement of STOU to e-university especially at the highest degree level of the university.

- Librarians establish closer relationships and work closely with faculty members. It has been acknowledged that academic staff (i.e. faculty and course instructions) exert a great influence over undergraduate and postgraduate use of electronic information system than library staff. (Griffiths 2005) .Moreover, email and face to face contact should be used as Glynn and Wu (2003) found that they were the most effective channels of communication with teaching faculty and academic departments.

- University policy to facilitate more formal lines of communication, formalizing responsibility of librarians and partnerships between faculty and librarians in supporting Doctoral degree programme via distance education. Faculty-librarian partnership, built on working relationships will enhance both parties, faculty and librarians feeling enthusiastic to cooperate and collaborate.

- Clear educational roles of librarians are set and recognized. The name of librarian who serves as a liaison librarian or course librarian of each course should also be included in the course study guide and on the e-learning.

- Collegial and administrative support from faculty members, Doctoral students and administrators is critical to the ability to focus on librarians' education roles as expected.

- New perception, new knowledge and competencies (in subject areas, teaching,

communication and information technologies, and other related disciplines, e.g. communication, management), of academic librarians as well as new strategies, new methods, new technologies in performing their roles and librarians' continuing professional development are needed to achieve the expected roles , challenged by the fact that academic library profession has been poorly understood by students and faculty (Wilson 2008).

● Librarians should demonstrate their competencies and their ability to contribute to the educational process at the Doctoral degree programme so that their roles will be recognized and perceived properly by the academic community

Conclusion

In conclusion, a new education environment should be created through rethinking the library and librarians' roles and changing the fundamental teaching approaches in higher education. Educational roles of distance academic librarians, specifically at STOU should be enhanced so that their possible contribution can be expanded for the success of STOU Doctoral degree programme via distance education system. The integration perspective through expanding their roles as faculty partners, as instructional librarians or teaching librarians, as liaison librarians and as researchers through the proposed faculty-librarianship guidelines would enhance librarians' educational roles and hence their status. The distance education process could be made more successful through libraries and librarians as cooperative partners in the distance education system .However, this require restructuring of STOU librarians' roles and competencies in order to cope with the changing distance education environment especially at the Doctoral degree programme and further research studies.

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