

## **The International Centre for Distance Learning of the United Nations University: Resources and Services**

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The International Centre for Distance Learning (ICDL), which operates on the campus of the United Kingdom Open University, was set up in 1983 with the support and cooperation of the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) and the Open University. It is funded by the United Nations University (UNU), based in Tokyo. The staff comprises the Honorary Director, Lord Perry, the founding Vice-Chancellor of the Open University; the Documentation Officer, Keith Harry; and the Information and Documentation Assistant, Nazira Ismail. The UNU Global Learning Division supports ICDL's activities by reason of its particular interest in distance education as a potentially effective tool in its own work. Since the purpose of the UNU is, by supporting research activities, to address problems faced by developing countries, ICDL is very much committed to information collection and dissemination in relation to developing as well as developed countries.

The information which ICDL holds is available to any enquirer by letter, telex, telephone, electronic mail, computer conference, or personal visit. Enquiries from outside the U.K. are particularly welcomed. This article describes the resources and services currently offered and those which are planned.

ICDL has two main resource collections. One is a collection of documents, the other a computerized database. The document collection has three main sections; the first contains general and theoretical works on distance education; the second comprises course materials produced by distance teaching institutions; the third and by far the largest section is a collection of prospectuses, reports, journal articles, and papers relating to distance teaching in over 80 countries at all educational levels. Contact is made with all new distance teaching institutions and projects as soon as their existence becomes known, and information is obtained on their activities. The third section of the document collection, which contains a considerable amount of background material on educational provision in different countries as well as the prospectuses, reports, and so forth, mentioned above, is arranged by geographical region and then by country.

In order to cope with enquiries about particular aspects of distance education such as course creation, media and methods, and costs, a subject index is maintained which covers all new documents received. The subject headings used in the index are also used to classify the general and theoretical section of the document collection. Plans are currently being developed to computerize the

subject index. The time is ripe for the establishment of an on-line database on the literature of distance education, based on information prepared not only at ICDL, but also in other institutions in different regions of the world. The Thirteenth World Conference of the International Council for Distance Education held in Melbourne, Australia in August 1985, saw the first steps taken toward the collaborative development of such a system with the setting up of an informal Bibliographic Database Working Group. Further work was undertaken immediately prior to the May 1986 Open Learning Institute Distance Education Conference in Vancouver. The aim is an on-line database which will enable people based in countries that can link into the international communications network to search direct from their own institution in the same way as they currently search databases like ERIC. It should be possible to search by subject, by author, by title, by date, and so forth. For people unable to make use of this facility directly, a search system based on telex or telemesssage, with actual searches being made by ICDL staff, will be used. Such a database will also simplify the production of ICDL's quarterly new accessions list, which is distributed to about 50 countries and provides an updating service on new publications in the distance education field. A very recent development is the possible utilization of compact disc as an alternative or as a supplement to the on-line facility. Supplying a complete copy of the database on compact disc would enable users to undertake their own searches in their own time in their own institutions. Whatever the form or forms in which the database is made available, it will be vital to provide an alternative service for people who still need to contact ICDL direct for information.

The second major information resource is a computerized database of basic information on distance teaching institutions. The database has recently been transferred to the Mapper System on the Open University's Sperry/Univac main-frame computer. The information in the database has been supplied by institutions themselves on a specially-designed standard form, translated into several different languages by courtesy of various ICDE members and Open University staff. The initial collection exercise in 1983/84 brought in responses from 400 institutions. The first updating, undertaken in 1984/85, has increased the number of institutions represented to over 500. The second updating will take place in mid-1986, having been delayed by the system transfer.

What kinds of questions can be answered from the database? Broad questions such as, "Which institutions teach agriculture at a distance?" or "How many institutions teach at a distance in Asia?" can be answered very easily. It is also possible to obtain a speedy response to more complex questions. The three separate broad questions which I have given as examples could be combined to ask the question, "Which institutions in Asia teach agriculture at a distance using a radio component?" The search could be narrowed even further by specifying a particular language of instruction, a particular country, a particular education level, and/or a particular type of entry requirement. Information can be retrieved from the database in many different configurations and has already been used for many different purposes. Among the most common types of users so far are potential students seeking courses in particular subjects and countries, postgraduate stu-

dents trying to gain a picture of distance education provision in a particular subject area to further their research, and course planners looking to identify courses already being offered elsewhere in subjects of particular interest to their institutions. Lord Perry's report, *The State of Distance-Learning Worldwide*, published by ICDL, is an analysis of information obtained from a series of searches made on the database in May 1984. A further logical development following on the establishment of the database on distance education literature is to make the existing database accessible through the same technology which is adopted for the new database.

At present it is not possible to search the database beyond broad subject areas such as science, technology, and arts, when it would frequently be very useful to be able to search for biology, chemistry, electronic engineering, history, and so forth. This is a second area for possible development which is currently being explored. It is hoped that some expansion can be made before the 1986 updating begins.

Cooperation is central to ICDL's activities. There is a great deal to be gained from cooperation and collaboration in the areas of information and documentation, for a variety of reasons. Most notably, many institutions worldwide are realizing the benefits to be gained from an awareness of developments in distance education in other parts of the world, and are making attempts to collect documentation. It is important that the literature be identified and made accessible as quickly and as comprehensively as possible. ICDL assists this process by producing and distributing its quarterly new accessions list, and the new database will represent a great step forward in literature searching. No single unit can cope adequately, however, with all the documentation that is now appearing. It is essential that the database system which is now being developed allows for transfer of information out of ICDL into other databases which are being established by Working Group members and by other workers in the area, and into ICDL from other parts of the world.

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