

Distance Librarianship in Small States: What Are the Challenges?

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Abstract

Distance education has presented several new challenges to information facilitators. Providing quality distance library services in small states has its own unique set of issues, which are as yet unreported in the literature. This paper examines the concept of small states and how this impacts on providing distance librarianship to persons resident in such states. Also examined are strategies that can be employed to provide distance library services in small states.

Introduction

The present level of interest in matters pertaining to small states dates from the latter half of the twentieth century when many colonies became independent nations. While small states are found in every area of the world, most small states are located in either the Caribbean or South Pacific. Brock (1988) reiterates the impact of the past vis-à-vis the present in terms of small states when he refers to the “conspiracy of history and geography [which] has brought forth a disparate pattern in which several significant clusters are apparent”.

While a single small state may lack clout, the combined numerical strength of small states enables them to influence and impact upon international issues at a level disproportionate to their population size, geographical extent, natural resources and economic base. Bray and Packer (1993), commenting on the significance of small states at the international level, state that:

...in purely numerical terms the world is a world of small states. Over half of the sovereign states

have populations below five millions and 54 have populations below 1.5 million. Some of these states are islands, some are archipelagoes, and some are enclaves. The states are scattered in all parts of the world, but with notable concentrations in the Caribbean and South Pacific. Some have considerable strategic importance.

More than half of the 79 small states were formerly colonies of Great Britain. Thus, within the Commonwealth small state issues occupy the interest of many bodies. Reflections on matters pertinent to the realities of small states enjoyed their first formal expression, at the highest level within the Commonwealth, at the 1977 meeting of Commonwealth Finance Ministers which was held in Barbados, itself a small state. At that meeting the discussion centred on “the disadvantages of small size, isolation and scarce resources which severely limit the capacity of such countries to achieve their development objectives ...”. Adding weight to this discourse are the following from a Commonwealth Consultative Group (1985):

“[within] the last two years . . . particularly at regional levels, [there has been] an emerging awareness of the reality of small states and some recognition of their special needs”. At the highest levels within the international arena there are few who, for example, did not comprehend the dire consequences that the 1983 military events in Grenada, another Caribbean small state, might have had internationally.

Small State Literature

Perusal of the literature on small states reveals considerable writing, including some seminal work that has been done by Beckford (1972); Brock (1984, 1988); Demas (1965); Jalan (1982); and Thomas (1974), among others. Scrutiny of small states literature reveals that economics, education, politics, sovereignty, national security and vulnerability issues dominate. Education in small states came to the fore in the 1980s when the first international conference on education in small states was held in Barbados in 1982. Despite the numerical extent of small states, an examination of the two seminal bibliographies on distance librarianship (Latham, Slade and Budnick, 1991 and Slade and Kascus, 1996) reveals that less than 10 percent of the entries cited between these two publications cover non-developed countries/ areas. Turning specifically to librarianship in small states, none of the citations listed examined the impact of smallness on either librarianship or distance librarianship.

Scope of Paper

This paper seeks to establish a correlation between small states, librarianship and distance librarianship through the application of the principal measures of smallness. No specific region or state will be used in this analysis, but

where appropriate, illustrative references will be made.

Small States: Definitions and Some Characteristics

Even though intuitively one might have a notion of what constitutes a small state, an exploration of the main characteristics and features of smallness is necessary. For the purposes of this paper the political and judicial requirements of statehood would be diversionary and therefore they will not be examined.

Thomas, quoted in Downes (1988), provides the following definition for small states:

smallness can be roughly measured as a composite and appropriately weighted index of population, national output - including its distribution between persons and its spatial concentration (dispersion) - and geographic area.

In the literature, there is no argument that demography, land area and gross national product (GNP), particularly per capita GNP, are the three most important measures of smallness. While an element of arbitrariness is attached to each measure, none of them is absolute, nor can any of them be taken in isolation. In this regard, Downes (1988) cautions that “although the conceptualization of country size depends on what is under investigation, it is important to note that the above measures are both partial and somewhat related”. Thus, Jamaica with a population of over 2 million is considered to be a small state, because it evidences many of the other characteristics of smallness. Table 1 provides a typology of small states based on the measures of population, land area and economics.

TABLE 1

LAND AREA (million square kilometres)			
Nations of the world			
1 m	.10-1	.10 or less	
28	86	84	
POPULATION (millions)			
Nations of the world			
50	5-50	2-5	2 or less
22	84	37	67
GROSS NATIONAL PRODUCT (GNP) PER CAPITA (US\$000)			
Nations of the world			
6	3-6	1-3	1 or less
34	25	44	60

Source: Compiled from available data in *World Bank Atlas* (World Bank, 1999).

Population: Traditionally the upper demographic delimiter for small states was 1.5 million. Increasingly this is being pushed to 2 million. The figure of 5 million has been used by Brock (1984). Table 1 provides figures for population caps of both 2 and 5 million.

Spatial issues: While there are no fixed physical parameters for small states, a number of other geographic commonalities are evident in these states. Typically, most small states are remote from each other and also from metropolitan centres. Isolation is another characteristic associated with smallness. An examination of the geography of small states reveals that they are either islands, groups of islands, archipelagos or enclaves. In this paper, 100,000 sq m is used for the upper spatial delimiter for small states (see Table 1).

Economic factors: Downes (1988) remarks that “several attempts have been made in the

economic literature to determine the extent to which country size affects the outcome of various economic events . . .”. In their examination of the economic factors associated with smallness, Bray and Packer (1993) comment that “*per capita* [emphasis theirs] and Gross National Product . . . are problematic, in part because of the paucity of data for many small states. Nevertheless, they may be instructive.” While a detailed examination of the economics of small states is outside the ambit of this paper, an understanding of its relationship to demography and land area are important to arrive at the construct of a small state. Table 1 divides small states into two per capita GNP groups, less than US\$1000 and US\$1000-3000.

Education in Small States

For many small states, the most important resource is its people. A well-trained manpower base is a core need in and for national development. Thus, human resource development is an imperative for small states. The role and importance of education in small states is ably captured in the following words of a Commonwealth Secretariat Report:

the experience of countries with limited land and natural resources, like Japan, Hong Kong, the Netherlands or Singapore, bears ample testimony to the fact that the real prerequisite for a country's economic growth and development lies in the skills, enterprise and industriousness of its population. Human resource development does not conflict with the pursuit of economic development: rather it is the key. It provides a sound foundation for an uncertain future. (Commonwealth Secretariat Advisory Group, 1997)

Commenting specifically on education in small states, Bray and Packer (1993) state that “there is no doubt of the immense significance of education in support of human resource development in small states”.

Accessibility to multidisciplinary quality education, at all levels, that culture national and individual development and goals is a challenge for small states. The use of alternative strategies to provide educational opportunities for nationals and residents of small states becomes an imperative.

Distance Education

Definitions of distance education abound. For the purposes of this paper the following will be used: “distance education enables individuals who, for domestic, national economic and other reasons, are unable or unwilling to pursue their educational goals through conventional methods or face-to-face learning” (Watson, 1996). The characteristics of small states and the flexibility of distance education make distance learning an attractive modality to satisfy the educational needs of persons domiciled in small states.

The Role of Libraries in Distance Education

Libraries provide fundamental services that support, enrich and extend learning. Latham, Slade and Budnick’s (1991) rationale on the role of libraries in distance education is substantially supported by many articles, books, standards and guidelines that are referenced in this bibliography and its companion volume. Several writers have expounded on the importance of quality library services for distance education. Richard Johnson, Special Commissioner to the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission of Australia crystalizes the issue as follows: “in the development of distance education libraries have a central place. They supply crucial learning resources”. Monroe (1975), providing another view, states that “the open university sets a new context for library service for both academic and public libraries”. These and other writers, including Cavanaugh (1994); Cleyle (1992); Fisher (1988); Kascus and Aguilar (1988) and Watson

(1992, 1996, 2000), reaffirm the need to have quality library and information services for distance learning.

Raish (2000) provides additional compelling reasons why librarians must be proactive in the provision of library services to distance learners when he states that:

the enormous growth of distance education programs has created the need for us [librarians] to make our resources available to off-site users. When our efforts have succeeded, we have gained new respect from faculty members and administrators.

Thus, even if the motivating factors to provide quality library and information services are other than altruistic, it behooves librarians to provide quality services to members of the distance education system.

Distance education has a number of inherently unique characteristics which fundamentally and procedurally impact on the provision of library and information services for distance learning, leading to the development of a new specialization within librarianship

Distance Librarianship

Remoteness, isolation, learning at one’s pace and in one’s domicile are factors peculiar to distance education and smallness. These factors constitute new elements and issues that are germane to any consideration of library and information services for distance learning. Watson (1996) describes distance librarianship as being “the professional and non-professional activities, procedures, services and practices that provide quality library and information services to all those who learn at a distance - regardless of the level of their education programme”. Munroe’s “new context” (1975) supports Watson’s contention that distance

librarianship is a new specialization in the profession.

The distinctive features of distance librarianship are:

1. Distance learners, in the main, do not come to their institution of instruction, their education goes to them. They are often termed “invisible” students;
2. Distance educators are sometimes themselves at a distance from the educational institution;
3. Client invisibility is a paradigm shift in librarianship as traditional librarianship comprises a high degree of direct and frequent client-librarian, client-library interaction;
4. Traditional library services are building-bound. In distance librarianship, library and information services have to be “taken” to the members of the distance education community, leading to the “library without walls” concept;
5. Distance librarianship requires that technology and other means of communication are deployed to overcome the “tyranny of distance”;
6. Distance learners need to access library services at their convenience e.g. late at night, early in the morning, during weekends and national holidays. Consequently, traditional library hours (9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.) are inconvenient for distance learners;
7. Distance education transcends international borders and time zones. These are factors that are not associated with traditional systems;
8. The team approach to instructional delivery central to many distance education systems demands that librarians become integral to the

teaching and learning process. Thus, librarians have to develop an understanding of pedagogy and androgogy in order to operate as full members of course teams.

The availability of practitioners versed in the isms demanded by a particular speciality is one of the responsibilities of schools of professional training. The growth of distance education demands that appropriate curricular changes are made in library schools. Kascus (1994), in writing about the importance of including distance librarianship in the curriculum of library schools, argues the following as sound reasons why distance librarianship courses should be offered by library schools:

1. Distance education programmes are expected to grow and proliferate;
2. Librarians in a growing number of contexts need to be aware of the potential and impact that distance education will have on library services;
3. Off-campus programmes (distance education) provide a canvas on which new ways of offering user-centered services can be tested as well as actualizing the electronic library;
4. Knowledge about distance library services will not only educate librarians but add to the profession’s theoretical construct, support research and scholarship as well as add to the literature base of the discipline generally, and this specialization in particular.

For these reasons, the provision of training opportunities in distance librarianship is an imperative for library schools.

Librarianship in Small States

As in other areas, librarianship in small states displays diversity. Variations are noted between

similar as well as different types of libraries. Some small states have collections of note, others are well endowed financially, some are adequately staffed and others are staffed by persons who are both highly trained and well versed in cutting edge developments of the profession. On the other hand, there are many libraries in small states that are under stocked, under staffed, inappropriately staffed, poorly financed and/or housed in unsuitable facilities. The ultra modern library of the University of Brunei Darussalam contrasts starkly with Brunei Darussalam's public library service, which is housed in several adjoining buildings that have been minimally modified for library purposes. Diversity notwithstanding, applying the principal criteria of smallness it is possible to develop a profile of librarianship in small states.

Demographic Factors

National population: Core collection development costs the same whether the client base numbers 100 or 10,000. Demography impacts on libraries in that the per capita cost of providing a core collection in a small state is higher than it would be for a larger one.

Collection size: The size of a library is usually related to the size of its host community. Consequently, most national, public, school, community, academic and special libraries in small states are considerably smaller than their counterparts in other states. The ability of a library to provide highly differentiated and sophisticated services is dependent on its collection. Thus, many libraries in small states are frequently unable to meet the developmental and educational needs of its primary clientele and other users.

Staffing: Many libraries in small states are under the ministrations of persons who have not attained the level of academic and/or professional training

required to optimize the resources of a library. Further, as many of these libraries have only one staff member, frequently referred to as "solo librarians", releasing them from their duties is often impossible, particularly for any long-term activity, wherever it may be offered.

Funding: The financial allocation available for library development is based on the size of the revenue base. Thus, the pool of funds available for libraries in most small states is, of necessity, smaller than that which is allocated for library services in larger states.

Spatial Factors

Information, the business of libraries, is one of the world's fastest growing commodities and services. The demand for information is not elastic, depending on the size of a state. The need to access current information quickly is of equal import to all states, regardless of size.

Impact of distance: Distance from publishing centres increases carriage costs. This negatively impacts the book budget of small states. Distance also adds to the time line for identifying, sourcing and delivering materials.

Economic Factors

Funding: The level of funding allocated to libraries in small states is disproportionate to the role of information in development, education and learning. Policy makers in most small states embrace the advent of the information age. Information creation and utility are activities that bear no correlation to demography, physical dimensions or economics. Financial provision for libraries generally has not kept pace with inflation or new developments in librarianship. Further, new formats of information dissemination, e.g. videos, have their own storage, access and utilization needs, such as temperature, light and

humidity control, playback equipment and sound proofed areas. Any diversification in collection development policies impacts on library budgets.

Collection development: Librarianship is no longer a book-bound or book-based discipline. The information age demands that libraries integrate all formats of information storage and dissemination in their arsenal. Providing information on a just-in-time basis requires that libraries look increasingly to technology, supported by fast, reliable and cheap means of communication. Points of service need to be networked with each other as well as with clients who wish access to a particular bit or bite of information.

Service points: The establishment of a library service point has financial implications. Library budgets in most small states have not kept pace with inflation. Due to the lack of finances there has been a minimal increase in library points of service, despite population increases and the establishment of new urban and suburban centres.

Facilities: Many libraries in small states often do not have enough space to optimize traditional services, nor do many of them have facilities conducive to the utilization of non-print materials. There are many instances of insufficient shelving, broken and obsolete equipment, as well as reading rooms under constant pressure by users for reading and study purposes.

Remuneration of librarians: In many small states the salaries assigned to persons providing social services have become depressed when compared to former earnings and inflation. Further, the salaries of librarians do not compare favourably with other professions. The key role that librarians and other information facilitators play in national development is misunderstood at the highest levels. The present level of remuneration packages

offered to librarians is, generally, not reflective of the importance of library and information services. Current levels of staffing, relatively low salaries and narrow career options for librarians in most small states are disincentives to persons making career choices.

Cost of purchasing services: New services and different approaches to information provision impact on library budgets. Trends such as charging borrowing libraries for interlibrary loans, procuring licences for databases and the payment of copyright royalties have financial implications. As libraries move their collection development policies from a just-in-case basis to a just-in-time philosophy, budgets have to reflect the cost of purchasing information.

Technology - macro level: Information technology (IT) services are dependent on a level of funding that allows the installation of the hardware and software requirements of technology-driven library operations and activities. Fast, reliable and cheap IT services have cost implications that pressure budgets crafted solely for book-based services. The cost of IT when compared to GNP remains high for most small states. Thus, cost is a factor in IT use for library and information services in small states, rather than personnel ability or national will.

Deep telephony penetration is another requirement for the widespread use of electronic based library and information services. Telephony penetration beyond the precincts of most urban and suburban areas of small states is limited. Telephone connections between dispersed clusters of population in small states is often limited to a few lines or a single line. Additionally, analog services remain the norm in many small states. Such systems are incapable of supporting the bandwidth required by and for sophisticated IT services.

The cost of technology and a weak economic base dictate that small states keep their IT hardware and software for periods that exceed the refurbishment rates adopted by more developed and larger nations. Further, the rapid evolution of technology and the need to remain state-of-the-art places additional financial strains on the budgets of institutions and individuals. In Barbados for example, this writer is aware of a quasi government entity that is responsible for contributing an estimated US\$30 million to the national purse where, up to early 2000, 386s and 486s were the only available processors! Nurse (2000), reinforcing this situation, states that “in fact some library systems in the Caribbean can justifiably be described as being in a state of technological obsolescence”.

Technology - micro level: International claims of diminishing costs for computers and telecommunications are not apparent in small states at the same rate or pace. While unit costs versus computing power may be on a downward trend, current per capita GNP figures for small states suggest that any IT purchase represents a major financial commitment for individuals and institutions in these states. Further, rapid technological changes demand that institutions have a regular policy of upgrading and/or retooling both hardware and software systems.

For library services, a database provider that has improved its product may impact on the budget of a small state library by requiring it to upgrade an existing computer or purchase a new system. Alternatively the small state library may change database vendors in order to improve the level of service it offers its users. Either option has attached to it a financial implication.

This exposition of library services in small states indicates that the traditional measures of smallness - demographic, economic and spatial - impact on

the availability of library services in small states. In addition to the established measures of smallness, it is this author's opinion that there are some social and cultural issues that are of importance to any exploration of the impact of smallness in libraries and librarianship and which must be included in any inquiry into libraries and librarianship in small states.

Social and Cultural Factors

Oral traditions: Many of the world's small states have cultures that are orally based. The oral tradition affects library development in two crucial ways:

1. The tradition of reading is not universal in small states. Therefore, the role of libraries in such societies has traditionally been weak, mainly because the percentage of persons who read widely for educational, recreational and entertainment purposes is quite small.
2. Societies with an oral tradition lack vibrant writing and publishing enterprises. Strong writing and publishing bases serve to bolster the development of libraries.
3. Many small states have indigenous languages, some of which do not possess written codification. Thus, reading skills in such cultures have to be developed in a foreign language because of the absence of written publications in nation languages.

Impact of colonization: Under colonial rule, libraries situated in small states were ascribed the status of branch libraries of metropolitan main libraries. Therefore, key documents pertaining to small states were transported to metropolitan libraries. Further, initially libraries in many small states were deemed to be the preserve of expatriots; thus, during colonial times and for some time thereafter, membership to libraries and other centres of information was granted

on a subscription basis. Therefore the culture of reading was not encouraged, stimulated or developed as a mass activity. Thus, historically, approaches to library services as well as literacy could be termed “elitist”. The absence of a reading culture in many small societies can be interpreted as a negative vestige of colonialism.

Changes in recreational and entertainment habits: Prior to the advent of technology as a supportive platform for recreation and entertainment, reading was the primary means of satisfying these needs. Internationally, technology has led to a decline of reading as many persons, particularly those who live in urban areas, are diverted to other channels of recreation and entertainment. Thus, the primordial role that libraries used to occupy as recreational and entertainment activities has declined. This has also been evidenced in small states.

Perception of librarianship: Writing in 1988, Partridge commented on the low regard and esteem that was accorded to libraries and librarianship in developing countries. This perception persists and affects the level of interest displayed by school leavers in librarianship as a profession. Compounding the issue is that opportunities for training in librarianship are often not readily available in most developing countries. As many small states are themselves developing countries, factors linked to the perception of the profession impact negatively on the profession at all levels in such states.

Of concern to some librarians in small states is that many policy makers fail to make the link between vibrant library services and national literacy levels. Arguably this is because policy makers see literacy as being principally a matter for educators, completely underestimating the educational role of libraries, particularly for post-school individuals. Additionally, there are some

librarians who have failed to connect with the new teaching-learning role of libraries and librarianship.

Gender issues: Librarianship in many small states is predominately a female occupation. While the impact of gender is not overt, this author submits that in a number of small states gender obliquely impacts on every issue, including those associated with the development of vibrant library services.

The preceding examination demonstrates that measures used to determine smallness can also be successfully utilized to analyse the state of librarianship in small states. Further, it has been demonstrated that there are some social and cultural issues associated with smallness which impact on the development of libraries in small states.

Impact of Smallness on Distance Librarianship

The factors that impact on traditional librarianship in small states also affect the practice of distance librarianship in these states. Looking specifically at distance librarianship in small states the following are other issues which pertain directly to distance education.

Demographic

Many distance learners in small states are registered with non-national distance teaching institutions. Therefore, in any one small state several distance teaching institutions may have students, but the class size for each may be a single student. Thus, small student numbers and multiple distance education institutions are the norm. Distance teaching institutions often do not make adequate arrangements for library services for their students. Local libraries are unable and/or unwilling to provide a quality library service for a single student, particularly if the area is highly

specialized. Thus, the challenge to access information resources is often greater for distance students than it is for students in small states who are pursuing traditional programmes in local institutions.

Spatial

Rural distance learners in small states are particularly challenged with regards to accessing information services. The time required to get to a library or receive information may exceed the time available for the particular task. Providing equitable access to library services in cluster states forces varying levels of multiplication and duplication of services, materials and facilities. Students in the disparate parts of states such as St. Kitts and Nevis; Antigua and Barbuda and St. Vincent and the Grenadines all need access to the same materials, at the same time, for the same course. Isolation also reduces opportunities for networking and increases communication costs.

Economics

The cost of purchasing textbooks and other reference sources for a course is often outside the financial abilities of many learners resident in small states. Access to electronic sources of information in terms of hardware and software requirements, electricity and telecommunications charges is financially challenging, where such services are available.

Social and Cultural Factors

In many small states, traditional beliefs and mores are still strictly observed. Thus, information that conflicts with these values sometimes does not find favour with censors or other determinators of relevant or appropriate knowledge.

Conclusion

The measures which determine smallness can, with success, be used to analyse librarianship in small states and in particular the practice of distance librarianship in such states. Further this analysis of distance librarianship in small states reveals that there are some issues which are peculiar to distance librarianship in small states. Out of this exploration, a useful follow-up would be the development of a theory of librarianship in small states. Such a theory could then be used to inform the practice of distance librarianship in small states, as well as the creation of appropriate guidelines for librarianship and distance librarianship in small states. Such guidelines will be very helpful for any benchmarking activities of librarianship and distance librarianship in small states.

Understanding the issues affecting librarianship in small states aids the development and institution of quality library services in small states. Recognizing these issues is very necessary for the development of strategies to counteract the challenges associated with distance librarianship in small states. The creation of supportive policies for traditional library services in small states impacts positively on the provision of library services for local distance learners. Accepting the responsibility to provide quality library services in small states is an important first step in the development of distance library services that effectively meet the needs of distance learners in small states. Policy makers, distance educators and librarians in small states must ensure that their distance learners have access to quality library services. They can and should do no less for their distance learners and ultimately the development of their countries.

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