Collaboration through partnership at UNISA Library: extending library services to students wherever they are..

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Collaborating through Partnerships at the Unisa Library: Extending Library Services to Students Wherever They Are

1. Introduction

The essence of creating library partnerships in Open Distance Learning is to ensure ‘access-with-success’ to higher education. Partnerships are underpinned by a philosophy of mutual benefit to partners, but especially to the recipients of the envisaged services – namely, the students. As the University of South Africa (Unisa) continues to be committed to its vision to be ‘the African University in the service of humanity’, partnerships become critical to the success of the University. Through such partnerships, Unisa pursues the larger goals of community engagement and community success.

This paper discusses the role of partnership in the extension of the services of the Unisa Library. It provides in-depth discussion of the value of partnerships to the learning community, the value of alignment with the institutional vision and the lessons learned. In providing its services over the years, the Library has affirmed that library-to-library partnerships enable students to ‘learn wherever they are’.

2. Background to Unisa

Unisa traces its origins to the University of the Cape of Good Hope Act 16 of 1873, which created the University of the Cape of Good Hope. It received the Royal Assent on 26th June 1873. The first students of the University graduated in 1874. This year Unisa celebrates 140 years of shaping futures through education.

The University of South Africa Act 12 of 1916 decreed that the University of the Cape of Good Hope was to be incorporated in a federal University of South Africa. The
change was effected on the 2nd April 1918. The University’s administrative headquarters were moved from Cape Town to Pretoria.

Six constituent Colleges were originally incorporated in the University of South Africa. Most were later to become independent universities. These were:

- Grey University College, Bloemfontein, which became the University College of the Orange Free State in 1935;
- Natal University College, Pietermaritzburg (and from 1931, also in Durban), which later became University of Natal;
- Rhodes University College in Grahamstown, which later became the University of Rhodes;
- South African School of Mines and Technology, Johannesburg (from 1920, University College Johannesburg, which was to become the University of the Witwatersrand;
- Transvaal University College which later became the University of Pretoria; and
- Potchefstroom University College joined the federation in 1921 and later became the University of Potchefstroom.

A seventh constituent, the Huguenot College in Wellington, Western Cape, did not become a separate independent university, but is still a partner of Unisa.

Distance learning at Unisa was introduced in 1946 when the Division of External Studies was introduced. In 1947, the External Studies Division saw the inauguration of the distance mode of instruction. The year 1959 was a groundbreaking year for Unisa as it became the world’s first correspondence university, using study guides, cassette tapes and limited face-to-face tuition.

Of even more significance was that in 1946 the first library book (see Figure 1 below) was accessioned!
At this stage, one of the influences of Unisa on South African higher education was to incubate more universities. The 1959 legislation made Unisa the guardian of more university colleges leading to the creation of the University of Zululand, the University of Western Cape and the University of Durban Westville.

In 2004, Unisa merged both with Technikon Southern Africa (TSA), which was established on the 1\textsuperscript{st} April 1980, and the Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC), a part of the larger Vista University.

3. Context of Unisa Services and Products

a) Students

Unisa students are spread throughout the world. In the last three years there has been a steady increase in student numbers (see Figure 2 below). This has been influenced by several factors, chiefly, the ease of access to higher education, the flexibility of distance tuition and affordability.
As a result of the diverse student population Unisa has chosen to invest in multiple methods and mechanisms of delivery for tuition material. In using multi-modes of transmission of tuition material, Unisa is not only able to reach all students wherever they reside in the world, but also to respond to their various individual needs and requirements.

Unisa is in the third generation of Open Distance Learning development that combines technology, face-to-face and postal delivery of tuition support (Henning 2010). While the University of South Africa is in a developing country, it attracts students from all over the world. It has students from developed countries as well as developing countries. It has students from South Africa’s developed cities, and also from its most remote rural locations. In order to ensure the success of all students, Unisa determines its method of delivery on the practical needs of each student. While it delivers its content in digital form to some students, it still delivers printed tuition material to other students whose requirements and locations can only be supported by print-based learning materials.
b) Unisa’s Vision

The vision of Unisa is to be the ‘African University in the service of humanity’. The vision has informed the University’s major planning document ‘Unisa 2015: An Agenda for Transformation – Revisited’. The strategic planning document is annually translated into the Institutional Operational Plan (IOP) ensuring that the vision is translated into institutional strategies. This is further entrenched into departmental strategies for implementation. These in turn become embodied in departmental plans and individual performance contracts which are aligned to the overarching planning framework. This all serves to make the implementation of the vision measurable (see Figure 3). Figure 3, the institution’s Integrated Planning Framework, demonstrates the layering and cascading of the institutional vision into strategies, objectives and measurable outputs.

![Figure 3: Integrated Planning Framework](image-url)
c) The Student Walk

The Student Walk outlines the student’s experience of Unisa from the awareness and application phase, until graduation and beyond, as an alumni (see Figure 4 below). The role of all departments, including the Library, in that ‘walk’ is indicated and mainstreamed. A tag online has also been developed that says “learn wherever you are”. This commits Unisa not only to expanding its social mandate of providing access to higher education, but to ensuring its commitment to student learning wherever the student is.

In that walk the Library’s role and input in support of learning is ensured.

4. Unisa Library Services

The Unisa Library’s vision is aligned to the institutional vision. The Library envisages itself as the ‘leading distance education library in Africa’. In line with the institutional planning framework, the Library aligns itself on an annual basis with the IOP by developing the Library Operational Plan (LOP). The LOP translates the broad institutional goals into departmental operational plans. These are then translated into individual performance contracts for implementation. In the context of partnership, the Institutional Operational Plan states that Unisa will enter into partnerships with
other libraries to benefit students. In the Library Operational Plan, the Library accordingly commits to create two partnerships on the continent each year, and two partnerships within South Africa.

a) A Network of Libraries

The Unisa Library is a network of eight Branch Libraries situated in South Africa and one Branch Library in Akaki, Ethiopia. Within each South African region, there is a further network of libraries that help extend the Library’s reach to as many students as possible.

![Figure 4: Regional Centres](image)

Figure 5 (above) displays the locations of the Regional Offices in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Midlands, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal. Each Regional Centre has a library. Beyond each Regional Centre Library, there are several invaluable partner libraries.

b) Unisa Library and International Standards

The Unisa Library has developed its services according to the standards for distance education libraries of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) which state that the student experience of the library must be equitable regardless of the student’s location. Students must be able to transact with their library in the same as if they had walked into the parent institution even though they are located at a distance. Furthermore, the Unisa Library’s services are informed by the International Open Distance Learning standards which state that student support must reduce the transactional distance between student and university.

There is alignment between these ODL standards and the ACRL guidelines for library standards. Both focus on bring service close to the student experience. Both
focus on reducing the transactional distance between the student and the parent university.

Creating library partnerships beyond the main library and beyond the regional centres is thus informed by these two positions.

c) Partnerships

While the Unisa Library works according to international standards, within the institution, the Unisa Library further aligns its work with internal norms and principles.

The value of being aligned to the institutional vision is reiterated and supported by Tong and Kishy (2009) who state that the first prize of a successful library partnership is based on inter-institutional partnership agreement. In cases where Unisa already has an institutional partnership agreement, the Library develops agreements with the institutional libraries of Unisa’s partner institutions. This has expressed itself in several forms, for example:

i) the Library aligned itself with the Tshwane City and Unisa Agreement by signing a collaboration agreement with the City of Tshwane Libraries; and

ii) the Library aligned itself with the agreements between Unisa and the Nigeria Open University and between Unisa and the Tanzania Open University. It also signed collaboration agreements with libraries in those two institutions.

Tong and Kishy (2009:136) also reiterate that being aligned to institutional agreements ‘dictates the formality of the agreement’. However, in the context of South Africa, it was critical that the partnerships would go beyond those that are institutional to include those that are specifically between libraries. The need was greatest in provinces where Unisa did not have existing agreement.

Altogether, the Unisa Library has 21 library-to-library agreements with public libraries in South Africa. All the agreements are formal and are signed between the Head of the Unisa Library and appropriate municipality authority. The Memorandum of Agreement that the Unisa Library signs with its partners goes through stringent institutional procedures, including the approval processes of the Legal Services Department and the Management Committee (ManCom). These agreements provide the terms of collaboration between Unisa and its partners, for example, terms for the resolution of disputes, and procedures with regard to the possible future dissolution of such partnerships.
The partnerships’ sequence radiates out from the Muckleneuk Library → relevant Regional Library → partnership libraries → Unisa Mobile Libraries. The Mobile Libraries are the most recent link between external partner libraries and Unisa Regional Centre Libraries. The partnership agreements provide Unisa students who visit partner libraries with access to such library services as the following:

- **Internet Access**

In South Africa’s context as a developing country, the Internet is not readily available from students’ homes. The local public library provides students with the opportunity for Internet access. Thus, Unisa students visiting a partner library are provided with the opportunity to access the Unisa Library website, to search the Catalogue and databases, request Library material, renew items, and access online materials.

- **Courier Services**

When students request material online, the information resources are delivered by courier. In some remote areas students may not have a physical address. In such instances the books are delivered to the nearest partner library with which we have agreements. The local public library later receives the book back and then returns the book to the Unisa Library.

- **Book Collections**

There are two provinces, namely the Northern Cape and Mpumalanga, where Unisa has no Regional Centre Library. The Unisa Library, therefore, has lodged book collections with partner libraries as part of the agreement. These collections are based on student numbers and the courses which students in that area pursue. The collections consist of core study collections.

- **Study Space**

In some areas, home environments are not conducive to studying. The partner library thus provides Unisa students with study space. Through these agreements, public libraries and community libraries have come to appreciate that Unisa students are, first and foremost, their ratepayers or are served because they are part of the community those libraries are expected to serve.

What does the Unisa Library give its partners in return for all this help?

In return, the Unisa Library offers training to partner libraries. The partner libraries identify those areas in which their staff members need development and the enhancement of their skills. The Unisa Library, for example, has provided training
in database searching, collection development, Web 2.0 and an introductory course on cataloguing for our partner libraries.

In areas where book collections are housed by a partner library, those collections eventually become property of that library.

Unisa is exploring the possibility of expanding the menu of services that it gives back to partners to include equipment. This desire, however, will be guided by policy and resources.

d) Mobile Library Services

In addition to these partnerships the Library has also recently instituted Mobile Library services (see Figure 6 below). At the moment there are two such services, one in the Limpopo Province and one in the Western Cape Province. The Mobile Library in the Western Cape has facilitated an increase in the number of partnership arrangements with local authorities to use public libraries and municipal structures as Mobile Library stopping points. Some of the partner libraries provide the Mobile Libraries with electricity, parking space and other related services.

Figure 5: Students Waiting to Use the Services of the Mobile Library
Each of the buses is equipped with a satellite dish to provide Internet access. Where this is not effective, the buses have a 3G connection installed. The Mobile Library services provide books and lending services (borrowing/requesting, renewals and returns of Library books), information dissemination, online searches, answers to both Library and non-Library related queries, requests for the postal collection of Library material, access to the Internet, and support for information literacy. Figure 7 (below) demonstrates activity inside a Mobile Library. The Mobile Libraries are also equipped with desks and laptops for information literacy training. The actual usage of these services, though, varies from region to region, and depends on local variations.

In the Western Cape, the tiered relationship between the Region, partners and Mobile Library is well demonstrated. The Mobile Library travels between the Regional Library and the partner libraries. While the partner libraries provide stopping places for the bus, the visits serve to cement the relationship between the Unisa Regional Library and its external partner libraries.

e) Multi-purpose Community Centres

Multi-purpose agreements were set up by the Unisa Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Department. The agreements with these centres provide Internet and computer access for Unisa students. Multi-purpose Community Centre agreements, however, provide access only to digital content. They do not include book collections.

f) The Impact of these Agreements

On an annual basis Unisa conducts a student satisfaction survey. The Library also conducts its own surveys to gauge student satisfaction. Overall, the students have indicated satisfaction with the reach of the Library’s services.
Student satisfaction with partnerships and courier services has been growing over the last five years.

- **Book Collections**

Before the partnership agreement with Mpumalanga, the librarian at the partner library in Mpumalanga expressed concern about the Mpumalanga Library’s ability to meet the needs of Unisa students. After the partnership agreement, the partner library now holds a Unisa collection. The librarian and the students are both content with the collection. At the signing ceremony, one student observed: ‘Now I don’t have to make the trip to Pretoria to borrow a book’.

- **Mobile Libraries**

The Mobile Library services are penetrating areas never before reached by the Unisa Library. It must be emphasised that the SMS Service played a crucial role in marketing these services, which consequently increased the students’ usage of mobile-friendly Library services. This is a major step in breaking down the isolation experienced by many of our students based in rural areas.

When students were asked about the Mobile Library service their response was: ‘What took Unisa so long to provide this service?’ Students appreciate the regular visits by the buses and the opportunity to interact with the librarians. The services reduced the transactional distance between the Unisa Library and students and broke down their isolation. Students could experience the benefits of contact with and assistance from personnel.

The link between partner libraries and the Mobile Libraries in the Western Cape has significantly increased the number of users of both partner public libraries and the Mobile Libraries.

It has not been possible to establish whether the provision of these services has increased the pass rate, as that depends on many other factors. However, the students’ survey responses with regard to courier services indicated high satisfaction levels. On occasions when the courier services have disappointed, the students have been quick to let us know and we have used their feedback to improve these services.

All in all, the students appear to be very satisfied with the services of our partner libraries.
5. Lessons Learned

i. Alignment with Institutional Vision and Strategy

Alignment with the Unisa Strategic Plan, Institutional Operational Plan and the Library Operational Plan, according to the Unisa planning framework, has attracted strategic funding to make these external partnerships possible. The value of aligning the pursuit of partnerships with institutional strategy and vision cannot but help that service to maintain its course with the institution’s direction.

ii. Creation of Community

The Unisa Library could have continued posting or emailing articles and books to students, but through these partnerships the Library has created a space where communities of learning can come into being for the students. These communities of learning are critical for ODL students because they serve to break down the isolation of the distance learning student.

iii. Replicable Model

If distance education is to be seen as a solution to providing access to higher education for South Africans of all ages, as indicated in the Draft Policy Framework for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities of May 2012, this model of partnership is a low resource partnership. It is both practical and sustainable. It is mutually beneficial for the parties, but especially for the students.

iv. Mutual Respect

Mutual respect between institutions, regardless of their size, is critical to the success of the partnerships. The Unisa Library respects these partner libraries as equal partners in service to Unisa students, and the partner institutions reciprocate this respect.

6. Conclusion

Effective partnership between the Unisa Library and its partners is based on a shared philosophy of commitment to education. The participation of partner libraries in the ‘Student Walk’ ensures access to relevant Library resources and to communities of learning for those students who would experience the greatest isolation without the presence of these invaluable partnerships, and by addressing this isolation, the partnerships improve the Unisa student’s opportunity for success.
The libraries with whom the Unisa Library has partnered, understand and share Unisa’s vision of reaching students wherever they are located. We have learned in the process that the drive to reach students across the African continent will require new forms of partnership that benefit clients and promote people development.

The extended network of partnership that Unisa and the Unisa Library have established works well to bring higher education within the reach not only of more South Africans but of more Africans across the continent.

The commitment of each of the parties contributes to the success of these partnerships. The support of parent institutions is critical for the success of the partnerships. A partnership that is not based on a shared philosophy is much less likely to succeed, and the fact that Unisa’s partnerships are informed by a shared commitment to the outreach of higher education is certainly one of the keys to their success and value.

References


6) University of South Africa (Unisa) (2005): Unisa 2015 Strategic Plan: An Agenda for Transformation


8) University of South Africa (Unisa) (2012): Unisa Organisational Architecture