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“Your Time, Your Place, Your Off Campus Library Service”

Christmas Island And Beyond: The Delivery of a Library Service to Offshore Students

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The education of students at a distance has been the responsibility of only a handful of Australian universities for many years. The few academic libraries involved have taken on the challenge of loans etc. to distance students and have raised the receipt and delivery of requests to a fine art. In the past decade, demand for distance learning has ballooned. This has been due to factors such as the advent of flexible delivery of teaching via the Web, Distance Education courses being seen as economically viable, the convenience of studying from home and the growing demand for continuing education in the professional environment.

Many Australian universities now offer distance courses, with new players entering the field. The provision of a library service to distance learners has become a focal issue in a profession which tended to view Distance Education library services as an adjunct to academic librarianship. Madeleine McPherson, in her article in AARL (2001), asserts that it is recognised that a DE library service can never equal that provided to on campus students, not only because of the expense involved in the delivery of resources to DE students, but because “it is impossible to reproduce the on campus library experience for distance students”. She doesn’t go on to define the term “on campus library experience” but she does say that the DE Library Service can never be as convenient as being able to call into a physical library when the need arises. Why are we still pursuing this red herring? Why are professional librarians, many of whom are closely involved with distance services, still being sidetracked down the road to nowhere? Just as clients want the convenience of banking online, shopping online, buying food online and booking holidays online, so they want the convenience of using libraries online. I would contend that only a minority of our users want to visit physical libraries. We must address the needs of the majority. Libraries, to remain economically viable, must address client needs. The idea is captured in the wonderful phrase “point of need access”, coined so effectively in her paper at the Information Online & On disc ‘99 conference by Anne Lipow (1999).

There are larger issues to deal with; issues which are more professionally challenging, more professionally satisfying than desperately trying to clone a service which is on the way out – the traditional on campus visit to the library. The University of Melbourne is “committed to being a campus-based learning community” (Bridgland & Blanchard 2001), but recognises that campus-based learning is “under challenge worldwide”. We, as DE Services Librarians, must look to the needs of all our students and change the parameters from “internal” and “DE or Off campus” to “Australia based” and “Offshore”.

The provision of a library service to offshore students opens up a new set of challenges. Many of these are only now getting our full professional attention eg. the provision of information literacy programs to DE students. Unilinc (a not for profit organisation which co-ordinates the cost effective provision of sophisticated library technologies in the higher education sector in NSW) and Charles Sturt University have produced Web-ezy, a self paced, inter-active online tutorial designed to develop information skills. CSU has made the

package available to all CSU students via their my.CSU portals. Other academic libraries in Australia have bought the package eg. Deakin University. Web-ezy addresses the need for online user education. However, such tutorials are not commonly available to online users. Information Literacy packages are appearing on the Web but according to what standards? How do we evaluate such essential and long overdue resources? Central Queensland University's librarians and faculty staff have developed a framework that assists in the planning and evaluation of information literacy programs (Or & Wallin 2001). This is a beginning, but we need much more. The ALIA Information Literacy Forum pre-VALA workshop on Information Literacy is running in Melbourne on Tuesday 5 February 2002 at the Exhibition and Convention Centre. The aim of the workshop is to familiarise librarians with the CAUL Information Literacy Standards and teach them how to apply these standards effectively. With the delivery of information literacy to offshore students, the issues peculiar to cultural differences, language differences and different levels of computer literacy become more prominent.

The new challenges of offshore delivery are centred around speed and point of need. Posting a photocopy to Mauritius was an acceptable service two years ago, but new technologies provide us with better ways of addressing this. With the increase in global education and the enrolment of students from all over the world in Australian courses, an alternative form of document delivery must be used. We have the online request forms: where is the online delivery?

Charles Sturt University (CSU)

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is a New South Wales regional multi-campus university. Major campuses are located in Albury, Bathurst and Wagga Wagga, with a newly opened campus using Interactive Video Technology at Dubbo. DE library services are also supported from affiliated libraries in Canberra, Goulburn, and Manly.

Student enrolments in 2001 totalled 32,618. 22,167 (or two thirds) of these studied by distance education (CSU Division of Planning & Development 2001). Over 4,000 of these study offshore (CSU Division of Planning & Development 2000).

CSU is the largest provider of distance education to students within Australia, and one of the largest to offshore students.

As part of our electronic environment commitment to this widely spread body of students, online delivery of subjects and supporting resources and services are paramount.

The Library

With more than 30 years experience in the provision of a traditional distance education library service (ie. book loans, free photocopy service and reference searches), the CSU Library has sought out and implemented appropriate technologies to enhance these services.

Many will be common to the major distance education players.

They include:

- 1800 telephone service
- online catalogue with the facility to place requests
- online request forms
- remote access to citation databases, including over 5,000 full image/text periodicals
- online reference collection
- links to electronic resources
- electronic reserve collection

- online interactive tutorial, Web-ezy

Offshore Students

Globalisation is increasingly becoming a feature of higher education, along with the internationalisation of courses offered by Australian universities. CSU is no exception. Alongside individuals enrolling as DE students, CSU has forged numerous international links with educational partners. Such partners are located in Malaysia, Singapore, India, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Cambodia, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Canada and Great Britain.

As a result of our successful marketing of DE programs offshore, CSU was “recognised with a Highly Commended award in the 1999 Premier’s NSW Exporter of the Year Awards” (CSU News Online 1999).

The provision of library services to offshore students poses some special consideration. Indeed, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Distance Education Special Interest Group (DESIG) have produced draft Guidelines for Services for offshore students to address their special needs (Van Dyk, M. 2000)

The major difficulty encountered by the CSU DE Library services team has been the delivery of resources to offshore students. Due to costs, delays, and uncertainty of postal services in some overseas countries, our policy is to not post books to offshore students. In lieu of this, a Table of Contents service and free photocopy service are available by post. At best, this can waste valuable study time in postal delivery, and at worst one parcel has been returned unopened many months after despatch.

A fax service was then adopted, on a cost recovery basis. While this was mostly successful, the same difficulties encountered in faxing to Australian students occurred. These are notably that the fax machine is out of paper or an incorrect fax number, or worse, a phone number is given. Having the latter answered by someone who doesn’t speak English was a challenge!

The offshore students also have access to the Library’s full range of online databases offered onshore, and also to our growing subject-based Electronic Reserve. But, for individual requests and Table of Contents service, email has been our saviour.

The DE services team is located within the document delivery section. Surrounded by colleagues sending and receiving scanned documents in Interlibrary loans (ILL) and Intercampus loans (ICL), the DE team decided to try this means of delivery to individual offshore students. Instead of sending to an Ariel address, we send to a personal email address.

The equipment currently in use at Bathurst and Wagga campus libraries is a Minolta PS3000 overhead book scanner and a Canon microfiche/film scanner. The Albury campus library has a Fujitsu flatbed scanner with document feeder. Software used is Windows NT, Epic 3000 for Windows, PixView 3.0 and Ariel.

The success was immediate. Needless to say, the students thought this was a great service; a real extension of “library on your desktop.”

As library use by offshore students increased, we needed to manage a growing list of students. An Excel list was established, and placed on the Library’s shared drive. We note the student’s name, student ID number, whether an emailed article can be received, email address(es) and any other comment.

Along with the scanned article, the students also receive the relevant Copyright notice, and a cover note relating to the item and how to access it. As different mail packages have different functions / requirements, we may have to respond to some initial queries. A notable problem encountered is delivery to free web-based email addresses, which offer limited file space, eg. *hotmail.com*. For various reasons some students (currently 20%) are unable to receive

scanned documents. Yet, one year along the CSU electronic delivery highway, our offshore students are happy with our efforts on their behalf, and often willing to upgrade their own technologies to access our service.

Questions for the Future

The provision and delivery of information and resources to DE and offshore students will continue to pose challenges for library services. Some of these challenges facing CSU include:

- capacity to provide this service to our other (potential 18,000) Australian-based DE students,
- budgetary implications of this in relation to equipment, staffing, workspace,
- potential OH&S issues,
- continued increase in offshore enrolments,
- implications of new courses, eg. graphic design, and requirements for colour delivery,
- keeping up with new and changing technologies,
- maintaining a personal presence, alongside advancing technologies,
- complexity of partnership agreements.

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