

Worth the wait?: analysing LIDDAS for off-campus library service delivery

Introduction

I realize now I was quite naïve entitling my paper “Worth the wait?” I should have known that would automatically relegate me to the last paper of the conference.

However for those of you familiar with LIDDAS you will know that it has been some time coming - hence the title of this session. The University of Southern Queensland was one of the first six “implementing” sites and became involved with this project back in 1998. We will only reach the stage by mid-2002 when we will begin to use LIDDAS for off-campus work. Once LIDDAS is established in that environment, we will then introduce it into the Interlibrary Loans area.

LIDDAS stands for the Local Interlending Document Delivery Administration System and as the name implies, it has been developed for use within the Interlibrary Loans areas of libraries by Fretwell-Downing, a UK-based company. Many of the people here today will have some familiarity with the LIDDAS software especially those from the Victorian academic libraries that make up the CAVAL consortium.

I will not go into details about the background to LIDDAS apart from saying it was developed to try and meet a need for a software that would both reduce the workload for busy interlibrary loan departments and also increase the autonomy of the requesting enduser (Kathryn Pearson, 2000). While the University of Southern Queensland will definitely be using LIDDAS to improve our interlibrary loan service, it was always the potential to use LIDDAS for off-campus work that attracted us to this system. A system that validates the end-users, administers the life-cycle of requests, allows electronic provision of documents and generally increases the self-sufficiency of the end-user was seen to be relevant to more than just interlibrary loans. Our interlibrary loan traffic is small – not worth the investment required by LIDDAS. However a way to improve service to our off-campus students was the real attraction.

Perhaps I should stop here and provide some details about the University of Southern Queensland and the Library off-campus student service.

Background

The University of Southern Queensland is a regional university located in Toowoomba, Queensland, about one and a half hours west of Brisbane. We also have a small Wide Bay campus located in Hervey Bay. In 2001, there were about 21,000 students enrolled at USQ of which about 75% were studying externally both in Australia and overseas. USQ has had a commitment to external study for a long time and has a well developed Distance Education Centre. The Vice-Chancellor writes of the “e-university” in his welcome statement on USQ’s website which he categorises as “using the latest communications technology to provide quality choice of study and study support to people anywhere in Australia and the world.” Within this environment, the Library is very focused on finding ways to provide an improved online off-campus library service.

Demographic studies on our external students population show them to be generally mature-age, mostly with work and family commitments and time is their scarcest commodity (Madeleine McPherson 1999).

The traditional types of library service offered to USQ external students are:

- Loans service of books and audiovisual material (within Australia)
- Photocopy service (of journal articles, book chapters, etc.), and
- Subject search service (providing lists of references from journal database and library catalogue searches).

This is a free service apart from students paying the return postage costs of material they have borrowed and there are no pre-set limits on the numbers of requests per student. It is heavily form-based with no photocopying or subject searches provided without appropriate forms being sent via fax, post or web. There is a free 1800 number (within Australia) for any queries or requests for books and there is also a Research Advisory service (phone and email) which aims to encourage students to become more self-sufficient and to utilise the electronic databases most effectively.

In 1998, we handled approximately 20,000 requests over the year, with that number reducing to about 13,000 in 2001. This decrease mainly occurred in the area of photocopy requests and we attribute the drop primarily to the impact of the University exam paper web site and the Library's substantial investment in online full-text journals.

Immediate advantages of LIDDAS for USQ students

LIDDAS is sophisticated software with some attractive features for interlibrary loans, not the least being Kinetica interoperability. But what can it offer to off-campus services – and most importantly what improvements in service will the student perceive?

LIDDAS will be used for book and photocopy requesting at USQ. Advantages that should impact directly on our students include:

1. A single interface for searching the USQ Library catalogue and then placing a request. A student would search our Library Catalogue via LIDDAS. Once they find the item they require, they can place a request from that same screen. Alternatively the student has the option of just filling in a blank request form and LIDDAS will then automatically check the USQ Library catalogue for holdings when the request is submitted.
2. It allows simultaneous searching of any number of Z39.50 compliant catalogues. This would enable students to check any of their local academic library holdings with one search. Quite a high proportion of our external students are based in Brisbane so for example, they could choose to do one search for a journal across the three main academic library catalogues in Brisbane (UQ, QUT and Griffith).

3. The LIDDAS web end-user interface has an individual logon for each student. The information that displays is tailored specifically for them and students can monitor the status of their requests – eg. Shipped or Received. One issue is that these statuses are based on international interlibrary loan standards and consequently the meaning of some may not be clear for a new undergraduate distance education student eg. Idle (unfortunate terminology) or Pending. However this end-user website is quite configurable and hopefully a combination of good links to explanatory pages and the ability to create some statuses ourselves with more meaningful names will help to overcome this problem.
4. LIDDAS software incorporates the use of the digital signature as brought in by the Digital Agenda Bill in March 2001. The main impact for USQ external students is that pre-registration before being able to submit an electronic request for a photocopy will not be necessary. Our current system requires us to have a signed copy of a copyright registration form posted to us before students can begin to submit online photocopy requests. For our overseas students in particular, this can be a frustrating delay to requesting much needed material.
5. LIDDAS allows electronic provision of requested photocopies. Using the web document store built into the LIDDAS software, the student can access a .pdf version of their requested journal article, where copyright and licensing provisions allow. As we currently mail all photocopies using standard postal services, this is sure to be popular - especially for our more remote students.
6. Automatic email alerting will allow us to provide another service to students that is currently not possible because of time constraints. An automatic email can be linked to the various request statuses eg. when a request is changed to a status of Shipped, an automatic email could be generated advising the student that the book has been sent (so that they know to expect it). Or perhaps automatic emails could be associated with statuses like “On Hold” or “Not Held”.
7. Faster turnaround times on requests are expected due to staff time efficiencies such as:
 - No need to catalogue-check most book requests as the call number and availability status should display on the requests. Although journals would also have call number information, journal holdings information would still need to be manually checked.
 - Automatic authentication of the user - Is the student eligible and what sort of requests can they place? eg. USQ overseas students cannot request book loans. If we ever decided to introduce charges for our off-campus service, we could also utilise the accounts facility within LIDDAS to determine whether the students had sufficient funds to place requests or alternatively, whether they had exceeded their quota numbers.

Issues and challenges for USQ Library

It appears that LIDDAS will offer a range of improvements to our current service. However a number of hurdles still need to be overcome in regard to implementing LIDDAS for off-campus services.

The accuracy of the Z39.50 searching is clearly an important issue and there are problems with LIDDAS' ability to interpret the Z39.50 coding for our library catalogue system Virtua. The degree of Z39.50 protocol compliance varies between the different library databases and Virtua appears at this stage to be more problematic than most. Work is being done to resolve this but the level of Z39.50 compatibility of your online catalogue is a crucial factor affecting the use of LIDDAS for off-campus work.

Another important issue for USQ is authentication. As mentioned earlier, every student has a unique logon to LIDDAS. At USQ, we already have a well-developed authentication system with the one User Id and logon for nearly all university and library restricted web pages. We would very much like to use this same authentication base for LIDDAS to keep use of our website as simple and logical as possible. Fretwell-Downing are currently investigating the possibility of using this external authentication base but if this is not possible then it may mean a different ID and password for LIDDAS use.

A future challenge for us will be the upload of patron data into LIDDAS from either the student records database or the library catalogue. Some thorough investigation and trialling needs to occur to determine which of these systems communicate with the greater ease.

If we provide access to other library catalogues, will the students understand that they can only request material from USQ? Interlibrary loans is not a service offered to the majority of external students currently so the website needs to be designed well enough so there is no confusion regarding which books and articles can be supplied upon request.

How best to market and promote LIDDAS? We have already heralded its introduction in 2002 via the annual "Distance Education Student Guide", the University's primary information booklet for off-campus students. Other marketing/promotion initiatives are likely to be:

- a LIDDAS brochure to be included with the Semester 2 mailout of study material to external students from the Distance Education Centre,
- a "countdown" to the introduction of LIDDAS on our library website,
- an intermediary web page in place for a number of weeks after the introduction of LIDDAS explaining the changes students will encounter when they access the Off-Campus Library website,
- promotion at all our Residential School classes and external library workshops in Brisbane, Hervey Bay and the Gold Coast,
- and perhaps most importantly, extensive work on the web end-user interface of LIDDAS to include links to clear explanatory information on using LIDDAS and how to obtain help if needed.

If LIDDAS results in our services being simpler and easier to use, then it is likely that the numbers of requests received will increase. It is expected however that any such increase in request numbers will be balanced by the reduced staff workload in processing the requests.

Lastly one side issue with which we have been struggling for quite some time is a name by which our new off-campus service will be known. LIDDAS as a name is functional but not “catchy” and the meaning of the acronym (Local Interlending ...) is confusing when the system is being used to provide an off-campus service. Hopefully we will soon be inspired to find the perfect name.

Future directions with LIDDAS for Off-Campus Delivery

The service improvements that I have outlined and which we hope to introduce this year are just the first step in the implementation of this system. Our goal has always been to expand the single simultaneous searching to include many of our journal databases and perhaps internet search engines once the appropriate technology has been established. The difficulty with this is that the quality of results obtained may be inferior to the results retrieved from individual database searches as it would be impossible to account for all of the unique characteristics of each database. To our time-poor external students however, a single searching mechanism that is fast and easy to use is a high priority.

The University is moving towards developing a digital repository for electronic documents. Our goal will be to create links between LIDDAS and this repository making it easy for the students to work with the one interface. Similarly, later releases of LIDDAS are designed to interact with libraries' circulation systems. This will make it easier for students to manage their own library borrowing and renew material - all within the LIDDAS framework.

Evaluation

The bulk of this paper discusses what I believe will be the advantages to USQ external students of introducing LIDDAS. Compared to our current system, I am quite excited about the potential for improvement in service.

However it is not enough for the Library to feel service is better – we need to verify this with feedback from the students. We hope to pilot LIDDAS towards the end of first semester 2002, to a sample group of students who will be asked for comments and suggestions. We will also issue an online questionnaire specifically to gauge reaction to LIDDAS once it has been established. Over the past few years, we have conducted an annual survey of external students. We will hopefully obtain an objective view from this ongoing survey as to whether satisfaction levels are higher compared to previous years and where improvements still need to be made. As already stated, one mark of the success of the requesting process will be an increase in the number of requests received. As these statistics are regularly collected this can be easily monitored. Lastly turnaround statistics for the time taken to process requests will be closely watched to measure the impact of LIDDAS.

Conclusion

LIDDAS has been a long time coming and is still not operational but we believe that it will markedly improve the level of library service we can offer our external students. We are already aware of some of the difficulties and no doubt others will arise once it is actually functioning. However with distance students as the primary clientele of USQ Library, we need to find technology that will help us bring library resources to them. The internet has made it increasingly quick and easy for external students to identify relevant references and they want obtaining these items to be similarly straightforward. It is imperative that we continue to upgrade our off-campus services to both meet our student's expectations for an easier and faster service, and to enable the library to work as cost-efficiently as possible.

References

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