
Supporting distance learners at the University of Central Lancashire



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INTRODUCTION

The library at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) has been supporting distance learners for five years. This article looks at what has changed and the challenges that lie ahead. It also contains the results of a survey of the web sites of 92 other university libraries and compares the findings with our own service.

THE DISTANCE LEARNING SERVICE

The Distance Learning Service (DLS) was set up in 2000, based on the experience of our very successful (and still unique) Virtual Academic Libraries of the North West (VALNOW) service to partner colleges. However, in 2003, following a university-wide 'realignment' of the support services budget, the opportunity was taken to restructure services. Following a consultation process, it was decided to split the DLS, which had previously operated as a dedicated team of staff, along functional lines, i.e. registration, document delivery and user support. This decision was also based on the realisation that a small team would find it difficult to cope with the anticipated increases in distance learners (one of the main academic objectives of the university). A split now would allow time to adapt and build on existing practice.

The process of splitting the work along functional lines was complicated and necessitated not only dividing procedures and processes but also the original team. In particular, much work was done on areas where procedures and work overlapped

across sections to ensure effective communication methods were implemented.

So far, disadvantages have mainly centred around different sections having different priorities and philosophies. However, the greatest impact has possibly been on the original DLS staff: since the restructure, out of five staff one has left, one has changed jobs and one has gone part-time. Although a number of reasons may be put forward, anecdotal evidence suggests a common factor was the change in level of work: staff in a small dedicated team become used to a level of work, responsibility and autonomy which may not be present in larger sections.

However, this should be balanced with the many benefits which have become apparent. The services offered are still the same but are delivered differently and, in some cases, benefit from access to a larger pool of staff. Cooperation between sections has also led to a greater appreciation of each other's work.

It is often argued that a specialist unit¹ gives a more personalised service as staff are able to get to know users better. However, we have found this depends on the part of the service being offered. It has been most difficult for department administrators who now have multiple contacts instead of a single phone number. Students have been less affected because they mostly deal with document delivery staff from the original DLS team, so benefit from the same personal contact. Also, many students already used our general telephone and email helpdesks for help and support as well as the dedicated team so the change has not affected them too much.

ACCESS TO SERVICES: A COMPARISON

Last year I was invited to co-present a conference paper about e-learning at UCLan. As part of the preparation I did a brief survey of the web sites of 92 other university libraries to ascertain how many had a distance learning service and what kind of services they offer. It is important to note that this article is not a judgement on the *quality* of service offered, just a comparison of stated facts: web sites cannot reflect the level of activity going on behind the scenes. It is clear from the literature that some libraries are particularly pro-active, especially in the areas of liaison and information skills.

As of autumn term 2004, 47 out of 92 universities (51%) appeared to have some form of distance

learning service, varying from a specialist unit to a single individual to multiple contact points. Some libraries provide their services from a central point whereas a few others provide services from different (often subject-specific) sites. Keeble and McGill² remark that the 'services offered by the Distance Learning Unit at Leicester are not very different from other distance learning services within and outside the UK' and my survey confirmed this. Where anyone offered something particularly interesting or innovative, I have noted it in the relevant section below.

Eligibility

When offering a special service, it is essential to define who is eligible to use it. At UCLan, courses must have been officially validated as distance learning to qualify, though admittedly this has been circumvented by some courses! We do not therefore include students who are part-time, doing blended learning or simply live some distance away. Of the 47 who have a distance learning service, 11 libraries extend their services to other categories of user, the most popular being part-time and placement students. Cardiff was the only library to specify a distance (more than 50 miles) or travel time (more than 1 hour). Three libraries said their service was a pilot.

Since the restructure at UCLan, students are no longer required to register specifically to use our services. This has been made possible by the introduction of a distance learner category on our student registration system, which in turn feeds the information to our library management system, Talis. Before this, we relied on multiple ring binders of registration forms. There was a fairly even divide at other libraries of those who require registration and those who don't.

Web pages and contact points

Most libraries seemed to offer a mixture of dedicated web pages plus links to other general library pages e.g. for e-resources or subject information. I liked Robert Gordon's idea of specifically dividing some of their pages by services for UK and non-UK users. A number of libraries have also come up with acronyms to better market their services. As well as more well-known ones such as DiLiS at Surrey, I noted InFocus (Derby), OSCARS (Greenwich), AddLibs (Bristol), and my personal favourite DALLAS (Swansea).

Again it was fairly evenly divided between those who have a dedicated email address and those who don't. Libraries were less likely to have a dedicated phone number: most commonly stu-

dents were directed to document delivery, subject librarians or the general helpdesk which was why several libraries recommended students identify themselves as a distance learner at the start of each call.

On an 'innovative' note, I was interested in Stirling's advice on telephone enquiries. If requested to contact a student by phone, they will only make two attempts during a mutually specified time period, so the student should 'make sure that you are available to answer the phone, have someone ready to take messages, or have an answer-phone operating'. I would add to that, don't have 'anonymous call' filters as they block out calls via a university switchboard!

Documentation

Distance learners at UCLan receive a comprehensive A4 booklet at the point of registration with the library. This contains not just details on document delivery, e-resources, etc. but also how to access their university email and how to login to WebCT. Of other libraries, only five mentioned students would receive an information pack or booklet, while three had an A4 sheet/leaflet: the rest gave links to general library guides. Napier also produces a newsletter, Lookout, just for distance learners.

Document delivery

In 2003/04, 540 out of an estimated 619 distance learners were registered with the UCLan Distance Learning Service. However, typically, it is a small hardcore group of students who make use of the document delivery service.

Writing in 2002, Gadd³ noted 'there were as many different charging mechanisms as there were libraries'. Two years on from her article little had changed for either books or journals.

i) Books

At UCLan we charge return postage and will send a Table of Contents so the student can determine a book's usefulness before committing to the costs. There is no limit to the number of loans, except a maximum of 12 at a time. Of other libraries, 7 did not offer book loans. The most common charging models were: return postage (21), postage both ways (5), and standard fee plus return postage (9): the highest fee was £5.75. Only two libraries seem to post books overseas (Middlesex and West of England).

In 2002/03 we processed 137 book requests rising to 208 in 2003/04. However, September-December 2004 figures are showing a decrease over the same period in 2003 despite an increase in the number of courses. Is this because of the restructure?

Postage costs? Or are students finding alternative sources? It is worth noting our figures pale in comparison to those quoted by Leicester⁴ of 250 postal loans per month, even though they only charge return postage like us.

Three libraries (London South Bank, Stirling and West of England) offer an additional service of 'put asides' in which they will take material from shelves and leave it to one side to be collected. Stirling will put items aside between 2-10 days in advance.

ii) Journals

UCLan charges a flat rate of 50p including postage for photocopying journals in our stock. All the other libraries surveyed offered a photocopying service with the most common models varying from cost per page (5p-18p), photocopying costs plus postage to a flat fee (highest was £5). Four institutions offered a free service.

Article supply has seen a steady decline: in 2002/03 we had 99 requests, falling to 50 in 2003/04. With journals it is easier to pinpoint the reasons for low and declining usage, namely the increasing availability of e-journals (we currently have around 15000).

Whatever the usage, we seem to do a good job of document delivery if this comment from one of our students is anything to go by: 'what a fantastic, prompt service you provide!' We keep a file of testimonials for when times are hard!

iii) ILLs

UCLan will provide inter-library loans (ILLs) of both books and journals, and we will also post both to students (regulations permitting). However, this service is little used, probably for similar reasons to those given above. In 2003/04 usage amounted to just 11 books and 4 journal articles.

Almost all the libraries surveyed will provide ILLs, although some services did not specifically mention ILL as a service offered to distance learners so it was not clear whether they did or not. Nine have a quota system or limited the service to final year or postgraduate students. Only five would post books. A similar number mentioned books must

be collected. A common compromise was the offer to photocopy a specific chapter.

Inter-library loans often seemed to be provided by a different team to other document supply services (postal loans and journal photocopies). All our document supply is performed by the same team.

Literature searching

Offers of literature searches seem to be dying a death, probably because web-based e-resources make it so much easier to do it yourself. Although we offer this service there is very little take-up (as little as once or twice a year). Only seven libraries specifically mentioned they would do literature searches: Sheffield Hallam include detailed instructions on providing search requirements. Other libraries either made no mention of literature searches, said that enquiries would be passed to subject librarians, or a few specifically said they wouldn't.

Information skills

Most libraries, including ourselves, do not seem to offer specific information skills training to distance learners, except during residentials. Where mentioned, there was usually a link to general help sheets and freely available information skills packages such as Tonic and the Virtual Training Suite. Eight libraries had developed general online packages whether web-based or using a virtual learning package. Only Leicester seemed to offer online tutorials specifically for distance learners. However, I also noted Sunderland has an 'Introduction for distance learners' video/presentation, and Greenwich has a series of tutorial movies. For most libraries, this is clearly an area where much work needs to be done.

E-resources

Every library offers access to their e-resources to distance learners, mostly using Athens, although some use an authenticated proxy server. We changed our Athens usernames and passwords a couple of years ago to a standardised format which makes it easier to publicise and for students to work it out for themselves. We have also recently made the decision not to purchase databases from our centralised online fund which do not offer off-campus access, and will think twice about those who don't offer Athens authentication.

In addition to e-resources, Birmingham advertises software sales. This is something we also offer but don't specifically advertise to distance learners.

How many of our services are little-used because of a simple lack of advertising?

Digitisation services

These services make available texts (e.g. journal articles or chapters of books) which are not available electronically elsewhere. Our own service is called ERL or Electronic Restricted Loan and makes use of HERON. Although a niche service, it is vital for the areas it covers, particularly chapters of books. Only Birmingham and Glasgow made it obvious that they also offer this service. However, this may have been more a problem of terminology than omission.

Reciprocal borrowing agreements

Almost all of the libraries mentioned the UK Libraries Plus scheme, several mentioned local schemes (such as our NoWAL scheme here in the North West of England) and a handful specifically mentioned they would write a letter of introduction to other libraries. Sheffield Hallam will also pay membership fees if appropriate and essential. A few libraries provided links to their page of *UK Academic Libraries' Access Policies*.

Our take-up rate for UK Libraries Plus has increased since we started automatically putting the application form in our welcome pack. Previously students had to request it or print it off the web site themselves.

CHALLENGES FOR DISTANCE LEARNER SUPPORT

From a review of the literature over the last couple of years, the challenges of providing distance learner support have changed very little.

Defining a distance learner

As mentioned earlier it can be difficult to define who is eligible to use services. Boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred particularly with the growth of blended learning. Pressure is also increasing to include part-time, research students, health workers or simply those who live a distance away.

For libraries it can also be difficult to find out about new courses. Despite UCLan having an 'LLRS support for new courses' form which must be completed before validation, it is still rare to be involved in course development.

Document delivery

Although it is the most commonly offered service to distance learners, document delivery is not without its problems. Postal book loans are

expensive, even for students whose libraries only request return postage. Delivery time and the need to be available to collect deliveries is also a deterrent. Furthermore, as Kent⁵ points out 'offering a postal loan service for overseas students would encounter too many difficulties such as time restrictions, inadequate postal systems overseas and financial constraints.'

Photocopies of journal articles bring the perennial problem of copyright and the need to obtain a signature. Until electronic signatures are more widely available and accepted, little progress will be made.

Help and support

Evidence from the web sites suggests information skills for distance learners do not seem to be provided in a systematic way at most libraries. At UCLan we have started to develop a WebCT module though it is not specifically for distance learners and would not be compulsory. Some libraries are further along that route. However, only Leicester has so far developed online tutorials specifically for distance learners.

Helpdesk support is another area which needs further examination. In most libraries, including our own, there is no telephone or email support out of normal office hours or at weekends. Time differences also bring problems for overseas students. On a couple of occasions we made an appointment to ring a Canadian student at an agreed time, after normal office hours. However, due to work pressures, the student was unable to talk when phoned: this was frustrating for both the student and staff.

One initiative which has tried to get around this problem is the well-known 'Follow the sun' which links up university helpdesks in the UK, US and Australia. However as yet it is only for limited IT support. Greenwich are also trialling a live help messaging service though this is only during office hours at the moment.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

These are challenging but exciting times. Students are already increasingly demanding value for money and with the advent of 2006 this will only grow. Perhaps one way forward is more collaboration with our competitors: UK Libraries Plus is a good example. Another example would be the recent collaboration of the NoWAL libraries to purchase the largest collection of ebooks in Europe (from netLibrary). Such collaboration

opens up large, expensive collections of resources to all students, not just distance learners.

It is also important that administrative procedures continue to develop flexibly to cope with new circumstances. For example, UCLan rolled out online enrolment for distance learners this academic year and is now working on a project to cascade the information to other relevant administrative systems and to introduce online enrolment for all. In the library we introduced a distance learner category on our student and library management systems to make students easier to identify.

CONCLUSION

It is too soon to say if our restructure will be successful and this survey of other libraries shows that no-one has yet come up with a definitive solution. Each library has adapted its service to local conditions and circumstances as one would expect.

Keeble and McGill⁶ write 'we do not follow the concept of equality which means 'likeness'. We strive for equity...because equitable services acknowledge diversity'. We believe we can offer this equity in our new structure: time will tell whether this proves optimistic. However, if successful, it will put us in a strong position to support increasing numbers of distance learners in the future.

- 1 Tracy Kent, 'Information services support for distance and part-time learners at the University of Birmingham', *The new review of libraries and lifelong learning* 2001, pp 115-134
- 2 Heather Keeble and Louise McGill, 'Guerillas in the mist: breaking through boundaries to provide a first-class remote library service', *Serials* 17 (1), 2004, pp19-24
- 3 Elizabeth Gadd, 'Meeting the needs of distance learners without additional funding', *Library management* 23 (8/9), 2002, pp 359-368
- 4 Keeble and McGill, p20
- 5 Kent, p123
- 6 Keeble and McGill, p20