
Brunel University Library support for PhD without residence students based in Bahrain

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PHD WITHOUT RESIDENCE

Brunel University runs several degree programmes in partnership with overseas universities. One of these is with Ahlia University, a private university in Bahrain which is less than ten years old. Students work towards a 'PhD without residence' from Brunel but their primary location is in Bahrain. They have two supervisors, one based at each university. The supervisors are allocated from the Brunel Business School (BBS) and the School of Information Systems, Computing and Mathematics (SISCM), the two schools within which the degree is integrated.

The development of the PhD without residence means that students can get their degree from a western university when other responsibilities mean that it would be difficult for them to move abroad for years at a time. Although the PhD candidates are officially based at Ahlia, the nature of a PhD, being research-focused, means that they do not have to be at the university all the time. Many of the students live in nearby countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Much of the contact the students have with staff at Brunel is virtual, via e-mail, but two times a year a program of training and events, with attendance by Brunel academics, is organised. One of these events occurs in the autumn, soon after the intake of a new group of students. An aspect of this is face-to-face meetings between a visiting Brunel academic, the Ahlia-based supervisor and the student to discuss how the research is developing. Another reason for this event is training in

research methods. A number of training sessions are run by Brunel academics, but this is also where library-related information skills training is relevant.

INFORMATION SKILLS TRAINING

One of the key advantages of studying for the PhD without residence is that, as Brunel University students, the PhD candidates have access to a wide range of electronic journals and databases and other online subscriptions. Although most of the students are familiar with reading journal articles when they are researching, the majority of them have not developed in-depth literature-searching techniques prior to their PhD studies. Overcoming issues with logins and access to the resources is also something that many students have difficulty with.

At Brunel University we offer information skills training for students at all levels, including PhD students. When the PhD without residence programme was being set up, the importance of providing an equal opportunity for information skills training was highlighted. A discussion took place about whether this training could be delivered virtually and it was concluded that the training needed to be delivered in person. An agreement is now in place such that, with the autumn intake of new students, one of the subject liaison librarians for either BBS or SISCAM will travel to Bahrain to provide the necessary training. To provide in-depth subject expertise for students from both schools, the librarians alternate year on year.

Due to staff changes, I, as the BBS librarian, have travelled to Bahrain for the last two years, though it is planned that the new SISCAM librarian will provide the training in November 2009. This has been an interesting and challenging experience. One of my first responsibilities on taking up my post in spring 2007 was to follow on from initial work done by the SISCAM librarian to write a proposal which would agree to the need for a librarian to provide information skills training. Prior to this, the SISCAM librarian had trained the first intake of students, but no official agreement had been put in place. As a considerable amount of time is often taken in persuading academics of the need for students to receive information skills training, an official agreement was felt to be important. Additionally, during 2007, transfer of academic staff from SISCAM to BBS meant that more academics and students affiliated with the PhD without residence were based within BBS.

THE FIRST VISIT

The SISCAM librarian travelled to Bahrain when the first intake of students started in 2006. This was partly a fact-finding occasion, but it also involved giving training to the small group of new students, at this time all within SISCAM. She discovered that, although there is a library at Ahlia University, the staffing was not immediately available to provide the information skills training needed by PhD students.

THE SECOND VISIT

November 2007 was the first occasion when a group of staff from Brunel University travelled to Bahrain to meet with a large intake of new students. It was the first time I was involved in the visit so I was not completely sure what to expect. Everyone was very welcoming and the experience was generally positive. A considerable amount of my time with the students was spent on giving out login details and ensuring that everyone knew how to log in. This was not always successful, resulting in some students having to wait until their passwords had been reset by computer centre staff in the UK before they could access the electronic resources.

I had planned small-group sessions with continuing students to discuss any problems they were having with the use of library resources and to introduce them to new resources. These did not go exactly to plan as people were not usually able to attend at the time allocated to them and the computers did not always work successfully. This meant that on some occasions I had no students and on others large interested groups attended a session which would ideally have been a small-group discussion. However, there were, at least, interested students so I felt there had been some value in running these sessions. Some students asked for extra training while I was there, for example on using RefWorks bibliographic management software. This meant finding access to a computer and planning the training. This extra planning and organisation was somewhat difficult with so many other events occurring, but it was good to provide training on something the students found useful.

I came away with a number of plans for the following year:

- Login problems should be resolved in advance.

- More time should be spent on practice in literature-search skills.
- I would ask the students in advance what training they would like to receive, so that I could provide training where it was needed and gain their interest.
- I would get reliable contact details and set up an effective procedure for providing support throughout the year.

THE THIRD VISIT

By November 2008, there were students at a number of different levels studying for the PhD without residence. The first student to start her PhD had completed her studies, so one evening involved a celebration event hosted by Ahlia University. It was wonderful to see how proud everyone was. There were also continuing students and a large new intake.

Providing training for the new intake of students was challenging. As a result of my experiences the year before, I had planned several training sessions on separate aspects of using library resources. At the request of the academic organising the PhD without residence, I also planned to give an introduction to other university services, such as our virtual learning environment and the university e-mail. It was hoped that this would make the Bahrain-based students feel more part of Brunel University as a whole, and that it would encourage them to make more use of the resources available to them.

A new system that gives all students automatic access to their login details was implemented at Brunel in autumn 2008 and I was told that all the students at Ahlia University would have their login details before I arrived. I had hoped that this would be an improvement on the previous year since it would avoid the need to spend much time discussing usernames and passwords. Unfortunately there was more confusion than there had been before because the students were all at different stages of registering with the university.

Much of the first training session, intended to be an introduction to university services and to accessing electronic journals and books, was spent trying to resolve the login issues. This meant that many of the students were uncertain about which username they should use for each university service. Consequently, the amount of time available for training on library-specific login issues, literature-searching and use of databases was shorter than expected.

The training that I ran for continuing students was on an ad hoc basis because organised sessions had not been ideal the previous year. This meant that not all students who could possibly have benefited attended, but those who did attend knew what they were looking for, so the training had a positive outcome. The main drawback was that there was not always a room available so we had several small-group sessions in the university library. My main concern was that a significant number of people who had been studying for their PhD for a year had not made much use of the resources available to them. This may have been partly due to work and other commitments and concentration on other research areas. Additional factors may have been the confusion over the steps involved in logging in and accessing resources, and the fact that the training occurred at the beginning of their studies, rather than a few months in, when the students would be more likely to know what they were looking for.

THE ORGANISATION OF TRAINING SESSIONS

That a librarian should be providing face-to-face training has been agreed, but the exact details of content, format and timing of the training sessions has not. Both occasions that I have travelled to Bahrain have been organised at fairly short notice. Timetabling the library-related sessions among all the other events is often challenging. Even when everything has been timetabled, it is usual not to expect everything to go to plan on arrival. People arrive late, or not at all; rooms are not booked, or do not have a working computer. Therefore, it is often necessary to change planned sessions at the last minute and to let go of the frustration that comes with realising that not everything planned will be possible. It is hoped that planning further in advance for the coming year will provide some improvement in organisation and will enable us to rectify some of the problems highlighted during each visit.

SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

As students understand the information imparted to them most when they actively need it, many of the problems that they have in making use of resources are to do with the fact that the training occurs at the beginning of their studies. There may be a need for a discussion about whether the librarian should visit Bahrain when the students receive training in the spring. However, at PhD level, students should have guidance on how to access the valuable resources available to them right from the beginning of their studies. Training

twice a year would take up time and money that is not currently available.

PhD students based in the UK are given the opportunity to have training in a group near the beginning of their studies. They can then ask for additional one-to-one or group support as required. For PhD students based abroad, this additional training must be delivered electronically. Currently students can contact one of the subject librarians by e-mail or phone. When you are in Bahrain it is easy to see all the areas in which the PhD students could benefit from regular support: over the virtual learning environment (both from librarians and from each other), through regular e-mail updates and perhaps through extra training sessions using video conferencing. However, the students based at Ahlia University are only a small proportion of the students each subject liaison librarian is responsible for. After returning to everyday work, other responsibilities take precedence until it is time to plan training for the next intake of new students.

Both subject liaison librarians involved in the PhD without residence receive e-mails throughout the year asking for support or advice. A possibility for providing further support is to investigate passing the responsibility of dealing with some issues to library staff at Ahlia University. A similar procedure has been put in place in a degree partnership between Brunel University and another institution. The difficulty with this is that the PhD without residence students are often not based in Bahrain and travel in for meetings with their supervisor, so the support would still be long-distance. Additionally, this would involve ensuring that Ahlia library staff were fully trained and able and willing to be involved. In any case, some queries would need passing on: basic access queries are interspersed with in-depth subject-related research enquiries and ongoing login problems. These login problems often involve authorised Brunel librarians communicating with computer centre staff to have passwords reset.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

From the librarian's point of view, providing support to PhD without residence students is a worthwhile experience. Spending several days with PhD students and academics means that you learn more about other aspects of the research process, something that there is not always time for on an everyday basis. The opportunity to work with academics also illustrates to them the importance of information skills training and can be useful

when you're asking for more contact time with other students. An understanding of the research process and discussion with academics help when designing lessons for other student groups. These positives generally outweigh the difficulties of working long hours while jetlagged, in addition to an already busy autumn term.