
Building services to distance students

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Sue Cox has worked at the Bathurst campus of Charles Sturt University since 1989 most of the time as Distance Education Librarian.

She finds the role varied and satisfying and has seen considerable change over the past 10 years, notably with online communications technology and the growth in electronic resources.

Sue has completed a Graduate Diploma in Management by Distance Education through Central Queensland University and so understands the demands of study, work and having a life!

Her interest in flexible delivery of library services is maintained through contact with colleagues and membership of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Off-Campus Special Interest Group.

Previously, Sue worked for the Australian Catholic University (ACU) in Sydney as Curriculum Librarian.

1. Introduction

This paper takes a look at the building of library services to Distance Education (DE) students. Over the past twelve or more years, my involvement with this area of librarianship has witnessed unprecedented growth. From a very small number of DE students at Australian Catholic University, North Sydney, and progressing to 4,000 at Charles Sturt University (CSU) in 1990, to 22,000 today, the following forms an outline of observations and experiences.

2. Foundation

An underlying foundation stone in providing a library service at a distance, is the **minimal distinction** between on and off campus (distance education) students. This is best illustrated by the CSU Library homepage (www.csu.edu.au/division/library/). The links, borrowing conditions, access to online resources, and assistance are available to all CSU students.

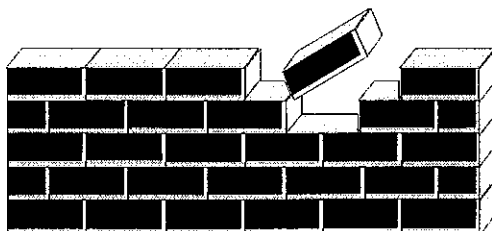
3. Building Blocks

A major consideration in introducing a DE library service revolves around an adequate **budget**. Total infrastructure to be supported and maintained includes staffing, delivery charges (post and fax), telephone, stationery, furniture and equipment, and space.

Partnerships with similar or larger organisations may prove beneficial to staff and students. An example is St. Mark's Theological College whose students enrolled through CSU benefit from access to a range of book and periodical resources across CSU. Notably, full-text databases, as well as **ATLA Religion** are at their disposal, which is often not possible for a small single institution.

Reciprocal arrangements can also be a saviour. CSU is a member of UNILINC, a consortium made up of universities and other educational groups using a shared library system, and offering free reciprocal borrowing to members, staff and students for in-person borrowing.

CSU DE students also benefit from an informal agreement proposed at an ALIA Distance Education conference in the early 1990's. This arrangement allows access to the periodical collections of CSU, University of South Australia and Deakin University libraries to each other's students via their home



library. For example, if CSU is unable to supply a requested periodical article to a student, library staff search the catalogues of the other two institutions for holdings. If held, the request is forwarded to the owning library where the article will be copied and despatched directly to the CSU student free of charge.

4. Framework

The framework establishes the basis for providing a DE library service.

Distance Education **policy and procedures** are required to set guidelines for all staff to follow. Issues requiring clarification could include: number of requests allowed (per day, month, semester, year?), renewals, sanctions, charges.

An absolute essential is knowledgeable, accessible and committed **staff**, to provide a fair and responsive service.

The staffing structure must allow for flexibility to cope with demands in peak times. Such effective use of staff time and skills can be illustrated at CSU, with one position being split between Distance Education and Acquisitions. During quieter times such as semester breaks, the Acquisitions section benefits with full-time staffing—time that may be "paid back" to DE at busy times as required.

Support from management within and outside the library is essential to building a successful library service. Collection of statistics and monitoring turnaround times form the basis for a case for staff increases.

University sections outside the library, including student administration, student services, finance, lecturers and the Vice-Chancellor play an important role in promoting and acknowledging the library service.

The DE library service and the part off-campus students play in the institution may also require promotion within the library as rarely seen clientele can be easily forgotten.

For the service to be real to the targeted

students, its details must be **communicated**. Face-to-face venues may be orientation sessions, residential schools and personal visits. Other methods include print or online versions of the DE Manual, brief information sheet and student newsletter. A popular online form is the *Ask a Librarian* short question/answer forum.

Currently, the *Ask a Librarian* e-mail queries are handled and distributed centrally via the Library's Executive Office. As this is an area experiencing continual growth, up to 2,000 queries last semester, we have investigated various online management systems. The two short-listed systems are Refracker and Quantum, although neither have been adopted at this stage.

Points of **contact** to meet all student needs should include all accessible technologies. For queries and requests, these may be post, phone, fax and/or online.

When introduced by CSU library in the 1970's, the 1800 free call phone number was a major incentive for DE student contact. Over the past five years, however, the online request forms and e-mail queries have outstripped phone usage.

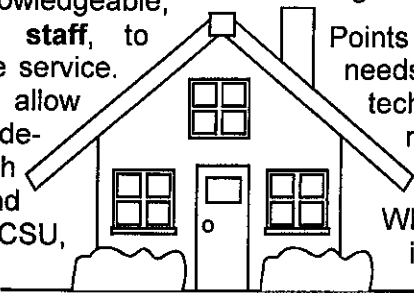
5. Walls and Roof

This part equates "The Service".

Loans of books and AV materials with borrowing times equitable to those of on campus students, and the ability to renew. Sanctions may be applied to encourage circulation; however a grace period may be required to cover return postage time.

Library considerations regarding **returns** cover the cost of charges one way or two, and/or courier delivery. As postage figures to interstate CSU students increased, a courier service was investigated and adopted due to speed of delivery and cost effectiveness.

Copies provide a useful alternative when only a book chapter is required, and the item then remains available. Copying free of charge is recommended,over



perhaps with limits, to save on administrative record keeping. All copy requests must comply with Copyright law (Section 49(2A)), and paperwork must be accurate and stored for four years.

Technological developments and "just in time" requirements for resources have seen the emergence of alternatives to a print or post copy service. Notably at CSU is the Electronic Reserve collection, made up of scanned articles/chapters requested more than once by DE students. The collection is arranged by subject code and author, and is also hyperlinked from the web catalogue. With the remote access of online journals, electronic resources, and full-text databases, a slight decline in photocopying statistics has been noted.

Reference services have also undergone recent significant changes. Print-based reference resources first made way for CD-Rom products, and now online databases.

The current offerings of full-text databases covering most subject areas has brought about a change from mediated searches, to the majority of students now conducting their own searches remotely. The preference for full text, ie. needing the article now, has also impacted on the search style adopted by students.

Desktop delivery of copied resources is an exciting recent development in services to DE students. While working alongside Interlibrary Loan colleagues who use Ariel software to scan and deliver documents in TIF format to another library's IP address, DE staff experimented with delivery to an e-mail address. Its immediate success caused this to be the default delivery method to over 100 offshore students of CSU.

This was a vast improvement on the sometimes erratic postal delivery, or at cost recovery, the expensive fax service. Still, some students without appropriate imaging software, or e-mail capacity could not receive this desktop delivery.

New Ariel software is now in use, allowing documents to be scanned in PDF format. We now mount the scanned document on

a local server for 14 days or 5 viewings, and send an email message to the student outlining how to access their document. All the student requires is Adobe Acrobat Reader, free software obtainable from the web but already loaded on most computers.

With the purchase of another three scanners for CSU libraries, this service will increase to include DE students in Australia from 2003.

6. Windows

Information literacy poses a particular challenge regarding DE students. Many will not visit the campus during their course of study, but great value can be gained from at least one visit. Residential Schools are an opportunity to program library classes in conjunction with lectures. Specific information skills are linked to an up-coming assignment to give added meaning.

A successful tutorial program has also been developed by Karin Smith, Information Services Librarian. In conjunction with lecturers, Karin designs a tutorial aimed to develop information literacy skills as a pre-requisite for a following assignment.

The tutorial guides students through the selection of an appropriate database, choosing keywords, applying Boolean logic and truncation, searching the library catalogue and determining availability of an article. This exercise is assessable, being worth 5%, and is marked by librarians.

For remote instruction, the CSU library offers Web-ezy, an online interactive library skills tutorial. It covers many facets of gaining research skills via modules based on CSU systems, styles and resources.

7. Completion

To conclude, Dubbo campus, the new node campus of CSU completes the full circle of our approach to library services. Dubbo was planned to be unlike any other CSU campus.

Many lectures are presented via Interactive Video link from Bathurst or Wagga

Wagga. The lecturers may visit, usually as part of orientation, and on-campus support is available.

A small core collection of materials is housed at Dubbo, and online resources and links are encouraged. To make available the rest of the CSU library collection

to Dubbo campus students, who are classified as on-campus or internal, they are also offered a DE library service. Thus, we return to the foundation stone in building a DE library service: minimal distinction between student types.



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