

# ***The use of libraries by post-graduate distance learning students: whose responsibility?***

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In this paper Neil Bolton, Lorna Unwin and Kate Stephens of the Division of Education, University of Sheffield, UK, highlight the confusion and inconsistency surrounding the provision of library services for postgraduate distance learning students. They ask whose responsibility it is to take care of the library needs of distance learning students, since there is no consensus about the answer to this question and there is evidence that a lack of consensus leads to considerable frustration among students. Such students may live considerable distances from the universities at which they are registered and what access they have to adequate further reading can vary considerably.

**R**esearch carried out in the UK and the USA suggests that institutions have adopted a number of 'solutions' to the problem. Among these, it must be said, is neglect, a lack of consideration of the needs of these students by their course providers and the ways in which these needs can be satisfied (see, for example, Fisher (1991), Unwin (1994), Kaskus and Aguilar (1988), Stephens, Unwin and Bolton (1997)). There is, typically, among such institutions little guidance given to students on access and use of library facilities coupled with an expectation, perhaps not explicitly articulated, that students will need to engage in further reading. A second, more considered, approach, is for the institutions to provide all the reading necessary to succeed on the programme; this provides a 'level playing field' so that different students do not experience particular advantages or disadvantages, but as a strategy it is open to the charge of 'spoon-feeding' and one would think it unlikely to become a widely accepted strategy as most postgraduate (and perhaps many undergraduate courses) seek to develop problem solving and information-retrieval skills requiring both the availability of resources and the autonomy of the learner.

A third solution which respects this point is for the providing institution to establish special ser-

vices for distance learners. There are some encouraging examples of good practice here: in the UK, special services are provided by Sheffield Hallam University, the University of the West of England, and the University of Wales at Aberystwyth. Ideally such services include dedicated staffing, a guidebook for students and postal borrowing. It is likely that more universities will develop special services and future advances in technology may bring the capacity for effective literature searching within the grasp of the distance learner.

A fourth strategy is for universities to develop reciprocal arrangements. To date these are organised within particular regions or link universities to specialist collections. There is no national scheme for access to university libraries and it is a matter of chance that a student might live near a university library with which his or her providing institution has an agreement. With increasing institutional competition in the distance learning 'market' and decreasing resources, it is not surprising that the option of reciprocal arrangement is not being enthusiastically pursued at the moment. Indeed university libraries are increasingly introducing electronic barriers which discourage other university students from gaining access to stocks. This situation contrasts with Holland where a university student can use any university library in the coun-

try. There has been some enthusiasm for such a scheme in Australia, but to date arrangements for access seem to be confusing and inconsistent (Crocker 1991). Can universities reach an agreement of a national scheme? Or is this an unattainable ideal?

We shall not attempt answers to these questions of policy in this paper. Rather, we address ourselves to a more restricted issue: how do students perceive their library needs? The findings reported in this paper, from the first national study of its kind in the UK, are presented as a contribution and as a stimulus to a debate which we hope will take place at national level.

### **The sample and the questionnaire**

The sample of students surveyed in our study is described more fully in the final report of the project (Unwin, Bolton and Stephens 1997) and in a previous paper in this journal (Stephens, Unwin and Bolton 1997). Briefly, it consists of 977 post-graduate distance learning students, living throughout the UK, who were registered at 19 universities reading mainly management, education and librarianship courses, but with a number of small groups of other specialisms represented, for example, speech science, building construction, law, and public relations. A 30-item questionnaire was completed by these students eliciting information about the students' characteristics, their location with respect to their course provider's library, other university, specialist and public libraries, and their use, experience and expectations of library services.

A previous paper (Stephens, Unwin and Bolton 1997) reported the findings arising from the quantifiable responses to questions about library use and concluded that course provider expectations are important in determining library use, that course providers tend to underestimate the need for library use, and that public libraries remain a significant supplier of services to these students. In the present paper we report a qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions of the survey which were concerned with: how, in general, students were received and treated at the libraries they used; the extent of reported need for further reading; the training they had received in library use, difficulties experienced in relation to distance and time available; their views on charges for services, and their expressed preferences for services. We will look at each of these in turn.

### **How students feel they are treated**

Respondents were asked to say how they had been received at each of the types of library they had used (host university library, nearest university library, public library, or other library). This question generated a much wider range of responses than we had expected, since students did not restrict themselves to immediately relevant responses, but used the space provided to raise a wide range of issues.

A substantial minority of students made generalised positive comments about the manner in which they had been received. However, a relatively large number of respondents indicated that they had not been treated 'as a distance learning student' at all. Responses in this category varied from very negative remarks about the absence of special arrangements which should be expected, to comments which indicate that the student would neither wish nor expect such special treatment, such as 'no different to any other user' and 'just like a normal student'.

A relatively large number of respondents indicated that their public library is inadequately resourced for their needs: 89 in comparison to the 6, 13 and 11 who made such comments about host, nearest university and specialist libraries. Similarly, 33 made negative comments about using the public libraries for interlibrary loan compared to very small numbers making such comments in relation to other libraries.

### **Extent of need for libraries**

Many students (63) simply emphasised the point that library use is necessary or valued:

'Part of the enjoyment of doing a distance learning course is using any appropriate source of reference you can find.'

'Access to an academic library with space to work and research would be wonderful.'

Other comments referred to the impossibility of completing a course solely from the materials supplied. For example:

'I do not believe that a typical degree course is likely to be satisfactorily completed without at least some supplementary library material.'

'... any course is only a beginning point, therefore access to a range of background information is essential, especially in an informal browsing manner.'

And some students went further by asserting that in their opinion the inclusion of all necessary course material is highly undesirable:

'I would not expect all the necessary books, publications and so on to be supplied. That would severely limit the scope of my study ...'

'My course is very self-contained and one can pass exams without reading widely. However, it concerns me at times that this is possible, particularly at masters level. My use of libraries will be to further my knowledge in areas of specific interest, rather than to meet the requirements of the course.'

There was a suggestion, too, that the quality of a student's work would be likely to suffer from lack of library access:

'At the end of my course now. My work has disappointed me - poor quality, much to do with both lack of time but also lack of access to decent resources.'

'Good library facilities can make the difference between being confident in approaching course-work and supplementing arguments with reference to literature and scraping through.'

The majority of comments were thus supportive of the need for access to libraries. However, a minority of students (33) said that their courses were or should be self-contained:

'Distance learning courses should provide all the necessary reading materials for the benefit of those of us studying in rural areas who cannot access library facilities easily.'

'As a distance learning student, I would expect the course fee to include all relevant materials, notes, etc. to allow a well-prepared student to pass the examinations without recourse to additional material.'

## Library training

Approaching one third (308) made some comment about training already received. The following themes arose:

### Previous experience

For some students, library training was not seen to be necessary:

'Don't feel this should be necessary - I was taught to use a library at primary school.'

'Only an idiot would not be able to use a library. I don't think it should constitute part of the course.'

A number of comments referred to training received as part of a previous course, most typically as undergraduates:

'I have just completed a degree at \*\*\*\*. Training was given for the course.'

For a small section of the sample, professional background was relevant:

'As a professional librarian of 20 years, not really necessary.'

However, even librarians might not be as well prepared as is commonly supposed:

'It is assumed that we know, but I don't because my main work is in a school library which is not automated.'

### Nature and extent of training

A few expanded on the absence or inadequacy of training. Comments suggest that training is ad hoc, there is no minimum standard and it ranges from 'Very poor and insulting' to 'Structured day with head librarian and staff':

'Half a day induction at course outset. Very good.'

For some, the timing of training given was an issue:

'Training in use of host library (after one year of course).'

'Librarian demonstrated computer facilities and interactive video/CD-ROM. Now forgotten.'

'No but an opportunity was provided on one of the residential weekends in \*\*\*\*. I missed it because of its timing - Friday afternoon.'

### Problems of distance and time

In a previous paper (Stephens, Unwin and Bolton (1997)), we noted that the average distance of students from their host university library is 141 miles, with 7.6 per cent living 300 miles distant or more and 17.6 per cent living 50 miles away or less. However, 75 per cent of students live 25 miles or less from their nearest university library and 75 per cent live 5 miles away or less from a public library.

For a number of students (some 43 made spontaneous comments upon this matter) the difficulties presented by sheer distance or geographical isolation were significant. But the overall impres-

sion from students' comments reveals that issues of time were more important than distance. After the question of reciprocal arrangements, time was the issue raised most emphatically and with the greatest frequency. Comments on time issues divide into two major categories, those reflecting general time pressure and those directed at the limitations on time imposed by libraries. With regard to the former, four major themes are evident: lack of time for travel, restriction on time due to family commitments, restrictions on time due to work, and constraints on time imposed by the course itself:

'I work full time. I have a family. I run a large department. I do my course for the pleasure of learning but I do not have the time to mess about waiting for distance library services.'

'The main reason I don't use libraries for this course is time - finding time to do the basic course work is difficult enough when my wife works full time and when children of 11 and 14 need organising.'

With regard to time problems related to libraries themselves, limited opening times and borrowing periods and the time it can take to receive interlibrary loan requests are mentioned. One student summed this up:

'The time I expend on accessing information is out of all proportion to the level of my studies.'

### **Costs and charges for services**

Students are divided in terms of their attitudes to buying extra reading for their courses. Comments ranged from the wholly negative to those that were positive about the value of personal ownership of texts. Between these extremes, responses were qualified in various ways. For example, some thought that it was desirable to buy certain texts, but that the need for library access remained for wider reading, including use of journals. Others were keen to buy books that might be used as constant sources of reference, but wanted to be sure that they were making the right choices and might need library access for browsing purposes. The crucial role of libraries in supplying access to out of print books was also mentioned. The following comments reflect the range of attitudes:

'The course I am currently doing was advertised 'all inclusive price'. However, as I am self-financing, it was a shock to find out after I commenced

the course that a further seven books totalling approximately £300 was required, plus additional reading (mainly specialist texts) which either have to be purchased or reserved at a price (nominal).'

'I am in the fortunate position of being in mature, full time employment. I buy the books I need. I will probably only use the library when books required are out of print (as some are).'

'I hope the underlying reason for this survey is not to judge what prices students are willing to pay for facilities and set them accordingly.'

'There are many additional costs to distance learning and the use of libraries should be included in the course fees.'

'I don't know why the university libraries can't establish commonality and for me to transfer my library fee or a part of it to .... my nearest university library. I object to paying twice over and paying fees for a library I can't use.'

'... it should be fairly straightforward to set up a library support network so that all students had borrowing facilities at their nearest university ... a small extra fee or inclusion in course fees to provide this shouldn't be too much to arrange.'

### **Library services required by students**

The comments that students made on the services provided by their host university library were mainly to do with requiring further information about what is available: some students were just not aware of their entitlements, having received little or no information. In the few cases (3) where telephone services were specifically mentioned, the comments were negative. 11 students made a direct request for a postal service.

However, the overwhelming concern of our respondents was with access to nearby university libraries or specialist libraries and this concern seemed to outweigh any desire to see services at their host university library developed. 103 students commented upon the need for reciprocal arrangements with other university libraries:

'Reciprocal arrangements between universities with distance learning students seems only commonsense.'

'Universities should have a joint arrangement whereby distance learning students can utilise the

facilities of any UK universities including borrowing books.'

'I felt very frustrated that I couldn't use the full library services at local universities when facilities were there.'

'I was appalled by my treatment by \*\*\*\* University. They wanted a lot of money for second class access to the library.'

## Discussion and conclusion

Responses to our open-ended questions provide evidence of a generally positive attitude towards using libraries. In asking students how they had been received at various types of library, our previous work (Unwin 1994) had suggested that we might expect a good many complaints. However, this is not the overriding impression on inspection of students' comments in which words of praise and appreciation were at least apparent as criticism. To some extent this may be due to a relatively low level of expectation regarding library rights and services: we gained the impression that many students were pleased to be treated 'just like a normal student'.

There is a significant level of concern among the sample surveyed about training in library use. Only a small number of students indicated that they had received training sessions of a more than basic kind; when training had been received, it took the form of a short introductory talk, perhaps linked with a guided visit. Even those students familiar with the use of libraries from their undergraduate days would not be up-to-date with the technology now available and would benefit from more extensive training. A frequent request was for specific information about the library's usual range of services; these comments exceeded those expressing a demand for special, remote services such as postal loans or electronic access.

Indeed, where students do make requests for special distance learning services, it is much more likely that they have in mind improvements in facilities at a nearby university library than the availability of remote services. Many are critical of the lack of co-operative arrangements between university libraries and of the charges for membership of borrowing rights demanded by these libraries. This need is probably linked to time-pressures experienced by distance learning students which contributes to minimal use of the host university library.

Students appear to want, in the main, library access close to home which will allow them to browse and borrow.

This finding provides food for thought in the light of our survey of the views of university librarians which we shall report in more detail in a subsequent paper. Judging by the remarks of university librarians, there is a distinct nervousness about reciprocal access (which libraries will be the 'net gainers' and 'losers'?) and the prospect of national co-operation seems a distant prospect, highly unlikely in a time of market forces and competition. It is much more likely that we will see growth in the development of special services from the host institutions, especially when teaching quality assessments for distance learning programmes develop to focus more precisely and systematically on adequacy of library provision.

However, there are, on the evidence of the present study, clear student preferences for co-operative arrangements. Much remains to be done in improving library services for distance learning students and the host institutions have clear responsibilities to look after their own students. But our findings lead us to conclude that the door should also be kept open for discussion of a wider shared responsibility for meeting the needs of these students across institutional boundaries. ■

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