

Library services for external postgraduate and overseas students

Tony Cavanagh and Bernadette Lingham

Introduction

The need for adequate library services to support distance students is not always appreciated by academic staff and distance educators, although it is of concern to librarians. In particular, the provision of services to postgraduate and overseas-based students can give rise to considerable anxiety.

The costs to the library of (i) inter-library loan services, (ii) complex nature of postgraduate subject requests and their need for comprehensive literature searches, (iii) extensive staff time and resources needed to satisfy these requests, and (iv) the practical problems associated with sending library material overseas are all areas of concern for distance education librarians.

This paper addresses these concerns, discussing Deakin University's library service, which, since its inception in 1978, has provided for both groups of students.

Our statistics show that off-campus postgraduate students have not made the demand upon the library's resources that might have been expected. However, because of the level of demand for material on inter-library loan, they cost much more, per student using the service, than undergraduates.

When considering overseas-based off-campus students, the library's greatest difficulty in meeting the information needs of this group lies with the overseas mail systems. Their slowness and unreliability can result in continuing problems for both the students anxiously waiting for parcels, and the library.

Background

The role of the library in the education of off-campus students is rarely considered in distance education literature, although it is of ongoing concern to librarians. Traditionally, off-campus students have been provided with study guides and books of readings for their study. Some lecturers consider that, especially for undergraduate students, a properly-designed study guide and a comprehensive set of readings should be adequate for the student to complete the unit. However, Winter and Cameron (1983) found that many students are stimulated by the provided readings to read more widely and

this actually increases their use of libraries. Moreover, 'they have greater expectations of academic success and of progress to further study, and express greater confidence in their ability to use libraries efficiently' (Cameron and Winter, 1983: 14). Bazillion and Braun (1992: 68) considered that one of the greatest obstacles (to success) of distance students was their remoteness from an academic library which 'also affects the opportunity for students to develop the critical thinking skills needed not only to conduct library research but also for career success in the information society'. Both Bazillion and Braun, and Appleton (1993), among others, contend that off-campus and on-campus students should receive the same level of resources and facilities because

Assignments require library research and distance education students must satisfy the same standards of rigour applied to on-campus students. There must be no leniency because of distance from the library, and the student's educational experience must meet the standards imposed by the qualification (Appleton, 1993: 2).

Nowhere are the difficulties in meeting this requirement more evident than in the education of external postgraduate and external, undergraduate, overseas students. This paper will discuss the provision of an adequate library service to these two groups and outline some of the facts which need to be considered in trying to provide satisfactorily for their needs.

Historically, the anticipated costs of servicing both groups have often impeded provision of library and other support. For postgraduates, especially research students, (i) their probable extensive use of inter-library loans service, (ii) the need for these students to have several often extensive literature searches using CD-Rom and on-line databases carried out on their behalf by library staff, and, in general, (iii) the demand they are likely to make on a library collection which is more geared towards undergraduate use are all causes for concern.

For overseas-based students, the practical problems are more troublesome. Who should be responsible for postage costs? What sort of library material can be sent and for how long? What are the likely losses of books when posted to foreign countries with notoriously unreliable mail services? What should be done about interlibrary loans? The list seems never-ending. Then if we compound the problem by asking 'what about overseas-based postgraduates', it can be seen why many libraries have difficulty in coming to grips with the notion of providing a full service to these groups.

Our experience and statistics show that postgraduates have not made the demand upon the library's resources that might have been expected; and some possible reasons for this will be discussed. However, mainly because of the level of demand for inter-library loans, they cost much more than undergraduates, per student using the service.

For overseas-based students, especially those in non-English speaking countries, often their only source of relevant books and journal articles is the library of their home institution. As our figures will show, some are very heavy users and despite some losses with parcels going astray, as a percentage of loans made, these losses are quite small.

Postgraduate students

The term 'postgraduate' has been used in the past with different meanings. We have adopted the DEET classification scheme as below (Department of Education and Training, 1992):

Higher degree—Research—includes Higher Doctorate, PhD and Masters by Research.

Higher degree—Coursework—Masters by coursework

Other than higher degree—Postgraduate—includes Masters preliminary, Postgraduate Diploma, Graduate Certificate.

Other than higher degree—Bachelor—Bachelor's honours, Bachelor's pass.

The data we are reporting on refers only to postgraduate students as covered by the first three categories—and only to those enrolled at the Geelong campus. It does not include honours students, despite the concerns of some who think they are entitled to better loan privileges than mere undergraduates!

Problems posed by postgraduates for the library

The English distance educator, John Bynner, in 1986, in one of the few papers dealing with the needs of postgraduate students discussed the central problem of teaching masters courses and higher, at a distance. This is one of the viability and the credibility of such courses in the eyes of the academic community. Interestingly he also emphasises the importance of access to library support:

there is ... the belief that limited access to postgraduate library resources will prevent students from performing at the appropriate postgraduate level. The standards of the Masters Degree, it is believed, will be threatened if the University undertakes such work by distance teaching methods, and its credibility weakened (Bynner, 1986: 23).

Another problem is that some distance educators and academic staff do not appear to regard the library as a necessary support service, at least for undergraduate off-campus students. (See Cavanagh, 1993, for a discussion). It is difficult to see this attitude prevailing with postgraduate courses.

The fact that nearly all of the distance teaching institutions today offer Masters and PhD courses indicates that the credibility of the course is no longer regarded as a problem, but what of the second part of Bynner's concern---limited appropriate postgraduate library resources?

It is perhaps relevant at this point to consider briefly the different types of courses offered by Deakin in the postgraduate off-campus mode and to try to relate expected or likely demand on the library's resources to these courses.

Table 1.
Postgraduate off-campus
student enrolments, 1993

Faculty	Grad. Diploma & Grad. Cert.	Masters Coursework	Masters Research & PhD	Total
Arts	69	193	92	354
Education	404	444	93	941
Health & Behav. Science	266	103	10	379
Management	-	382	16	398
Sci. & Tech.	521	-	20	541
Total	1260	1122	231	2613

Translated into percentages, we have 56.4% of our students as undergraduates, a further 2.5% are in honours, 37.7% are in various coursework postgraduate programs and 3.4% are in research courses. In simple terms, 41% of our students are enrolled in some type of postgraduate programme.

Borrowing by postgraduate students

Among the above courses, there are quite a number for which experience over the years shows that library usage is low. Examples of these are the Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma of Computing, the MBA Programme (or at least several units of it), some of the Graduate Diplomas in Education, as well as some of the Masters units, and a number of the Graduate Diploma of Engineering programmes. Table 2 shows examples from our statistics for 1993 of both 'low library use' and 'high library use' courses and units.

The very low requests-per-student from some courses indicates that many students simply do not use the delivery service at all. Our surveys over the

Table 2.
Student requests to the off-campus library service,
January–December 1993. Examples

Courses/Units	Requests	Enrolled students	Requests per student
(a) Coursework			
MBA (all units)	1110	382	2.9
Grad/Dip. of Computing (all units)	421	461	1
Grad/Dip. Occ. Hygiene (all units)	78	46	1.7
Master of Education Administration			
Core Master Ed. Administration	962	96	10
Selected Units			
Preliminary Studies in Ed. Admin.	22	17	1.3
Policy Dev. and Analysis	123	30	4.0
Administrative Context of Schooling	93	25	3.7
Economy of Schooling	79	28	2.6
Gender and Education	326	46	7.1
Research Paper	313	42	7.5
Master of Nursing Studies (all units)	872	98	8.9
Selected Units			
Reflective Processes in Nursing	39	42	1
Theoretical Constructs in Nursing	176	43	4
Guided Reading	100	8	12.5
Research Project (NRE 811)	49	6	8
Research Project (NRE 812)	94	14	6.7
Issues and Methods in Research	188	19	9.9
Master of Defence Studies			
Selected Units			
Asian Defence Policies	117	10	11.7
Master of Arts by Coursework In Literature (all units)	414	15	27.6
(b) Research			
PhD—Education	2349	65	36
Masters by Research—Philosophy	253	2	126
Masters by Research—Literature	266	6	44
PhD—Philosophy	274	5	55
PhD—Literature	424	4	106
PhD—Social Science	297	7	42
Masters by Research—Science	157	7	22
PhD—Commerce	81	7	12
PhD—Nursing	86	5	17

years reveal that only between 42% and 45% of enrolled off-campus students make at least one request in a year—not a particularly high figure but one which is consistent with the results for another Australian survey (Winter and Cameron, 1983) and higher than that recorded for others (Appavoo and Hansen, 1989). With our previous computer system, we were able to extract the number of each category of student who had requested loans. This showed that around 40% of research students and 55% of undergraduates borrowed from us, while the overall postgraduate figure was only 20%. The data in Table 2 clearly shows that this low overall usage is related to some coursework masters and graduate diploma and certificate courses, as most research units have high request-per-student figures.

Another way of examining postgraduate borrowing is to compare requests made and items/services supplied for the various categories of students. For 1993, this information is shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
Requests received and items or services supplied
for the various categories of students

Category	Research	PG—non research	PG—total	Undergraduate
Enrolled students	230 (3.4%)	2542 (37.7%)	2772 (41.1%)	3977 (58.9%)
Requests received	5126 (9.7%)	11700 (22.3%)	26826 (32%)	35793 (68%)
Books & A V	1736 (4.8%)	6340 (17.7%)	8076 (22.5%)	27815 (77.5%)
Photocopies	1464 (10.7%)	4224 (30.9%)	5688 (41.6%)	7972 (58.4%)
Reference requests	93 (6%)	385 (25.1%)	478 (31.1%)	1057 (68.9%)
I-L-L	1946 (61.4%)	729 (23%)	2675 (84.4%)	496 (15.6%)

While concern has been expressed about postgraduate students being a drain on library resources, this is likely to be true only for research students. Proportionally, undergraduates still make by far the heaviest use of the off-campus library delivery service at Geelong. In 1993, they put in 68% of requests and received 77.5% of books and 58.4% of photocopies. They also made nearly 70% of reference/subject requests. In comparison, postgraduates with 41% of students made 32% of requests and received only 22.5% of books sent. Their use of reference requests at 31% was relatively low.

However, they received 84.4% of interlibrary loans and 41.6% of photocopies of journal articles. It was the research students who proved to be proportionally very heavy library users, making 10% of requests for only 3.4% of the students. They also obtained nearly 11% of photocopies and over 61% of interlibrary loans. It is in this last area that research students can prove to be expensive to service. Many of their interlibrary loans arise from computer and CD-Rom searches which, in themselves, are frequently complex and need considerable staff time to complete. They also often require copies of these which are difficult and expensive to obtain. Yet, as Bynner states: 'unless a university is going to provide a comprehensive library service to masters students, their postgraduate work may well be incomplete' (Bynner, 1986: 32).

Despite the apparent extensive use of their home library service, postgraduate students (and research students, in particular) also make heavy in-person use of other libraries. Winter and Cameron (1983) in an Australia-wide survey, found that access to other libraries accounted in part for lower-than-expected use by postgraduates of their home libraries. The 1992 survey of remote postgraduate students by the University of Central Queensland Library (University of Central Queensland Library, 1993) found similarly that these students accessed other libraries. Use of other libraries thus may be a factor in actually reducing the demand on the home library. Our contention is that an institution which allows students to enrol for Masters and PhD work must be prepared to give them adequate library support. Two points which arise out of this belief are costs of such a service and the difficult question of how much work should library staff do on behalf of postgraduate students.

Costs

It is often difficult for libraries to quantify the cost of their off-campus library service let alone distinguish between costs for servicing undergraduates, as compared with postgraduates.

To try to obtain some answers to these questions Cavanagh and Tucker (1993) examined the cost of providing the off-campus library delivery service at Deakin Geelong during 1992. They showed that, largely because of the cost of interlibrary loans procured for research students, a research student cost seven times as much as an undergraduate to service, on the basis of cost per student using the service. Postgraduates, as a group, cost nearly three times as much as undergraduates—again assessed on the same basis. However, at Deakin, undergraduates are not eligible to obtain interlibrary loans—where an institution provides these for their undergraduates, the difference may be less. In addition, it should be noted that, at Deakin, the library meets the costs involved in obtaining interlibrary loans for students

and academics. Where an institution charges students for obtaining interlibrary loans, then the cost differential is likely to be smaller.

Staff assistance to postgraduate students

A question which sometimes arises in discussions on how students can research information in off-campus postgraduate courses is the vexing one of just how much work the library should do to assist such students. This is particularly the case with research students.

Consider the examples of reference requests from a country-based Victorian PhD student and an overseas Masters by Research student (Appendix 1). Some may believe that it is the student's responsibility to do his/her own research - that he/she should learn and know how to locate such information. After all, this is arguably the best way to understand the research process.

But is it all that much different to an on-campus research student coming and asking similar questions at the Information desk in the library? In reality, he/she can seek assistance over a period of time from a variety of reference librarians, who can help find the material. The student, in the end, is the one who must put the material together and write the thesis.

But more importantly, many off-campus students simply do not have access to the necessary resources for research work, although most will usually visit the campus one or two times a year to consult with their supervisors. For whatever reason students have chosen to study in the off-campus mode, they are generally not in a position to carry out their search for research material on their own. Their supervisor's assistance, coupled with access to library resources, is vital. We are that access point. This does not mean that we must locate and provide copies of every possible reference on a given subject, but more that our responsibility lies with getting the right balance between assisting students and undertaking their work requirements for them.

Bynner and Henry (1984) stressed the importance to off-campus students' success in advanced project work of adequate educational and tutorial support and noted that many students desired more face-to-face contact. For many of our off-campus students, such face-to-face contact is not readily available. It is thus likely that our support to a postgraduate student helps to compensate in some small way for the lack of the regular contact and advice that on-campus students can receive.

Overseas students

If we look now at overseas-based off-campus students, similar questions arise concerning the provision of a quality library service to this group of our