Paper 1:

Vigorous Engagement: Distance Learners, Learner Support, and Libraries

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Summary

Distance learners are a growing market for departments of all types in UK universities. Libraries must be able to adapt and fully participate in the move to a library where electronic resources play a leading role. Riggs (1997) summarises by stating: "The current and emerging technology offers an extremely positive environment for improving library services in distance education endeavours. Exciting and rewarding times are ahead for librarians who engage themselves vigorously in distance education".

With the introduction of networked collaborative learning through the use of computer mediated communication technology, University Libraries need to determine the most effective ways of providing course readings to students on on-line courses as well as access to information sources, databases. A small survey was undertaken at the University of Sheffield to review the requirements for the on-line courses offered at the Dearne Valley College. Core reading materials can be made available in either traditional formats or electronic. The latter involves applying for copyright permission, scanning the documents and providing user friendly access. A comparison was completed to determine the overall costs of providing materials electronically, via existing short loan collections or in study packs.

The move to reliance on electronic resources is a boon to distance learners. With appropriate technology at either work or home they can tap into many of the same resources as their on campus counterparts. A second survey undertaken at the University of Sheffield examined what current support is offered in both old and new universities for distance learners with questions specifically asking about library orientation, WWW pages for distance learners, and what developments librarians in the field expect will come about.

This future vision is both exciting and overwhelming. Staffing issues, technological issues, financial issues are highlighted: developing and maintaining electronic support mechanisms is time and labour intensive.

Introduction

- Lifelong education, distance learning, independent learning and part time education are all buzz words of the 1990's. The expectations and experiences of students, whether full or part time, are also changing as the environment for learning takes a radical shift away from the traditional class room and into an on-line environment. Casey sums up these changes:

> "Changes consequent upon new technology ... [and] changes involving more interaction among students, between students and staff, and among staff: interactive course-work, project work, group working by students and, to a lesser extent, group teaching by staff. The most frequently mentioned reasons for the change in methods were the availability of new technologies, increased student numbers, and resource constraints".

(Casey 1997).

Kascus (1994) states that: "New and emerging technology has further enhanced the potential of distance education as a model for life-long learning". Unwin (1995) also places stress upon the convergence of teaching methods: "Clearly electronic information access has great potential for changing the way learning takes place including the disappearance of the library as a physical place and the elimination of the learner to be physically close to the teacher."

The role of the library is central in any teaching and learning strategy. Both traditional print materials and new technologies need to be readily accessible to students through the central library. Callender expresses this relationship this way:

> "An essential resource for all students is their library. Indeed, the role of libraries is both changing and becoming more central to students' learning experience with the moves towards independent learning, the growing use of computer-based learning packages and the development of IT".

(Callender 1997).

Part time education is growing throughout the UK. Statistics published in Social Trends (1997)[1] suggest that the current student numbers enrolling in higher education from 1970/71 to the mid 1990's has increased by 331% at undergraduate level and by a whopping 977% at postgraduate level. The University of Sheffield numbers also show a corresponding increase in provision. Ten years ago (1986/87) 465 students were registered for part time degree and diploma courses. The academic year 1996/97 saw this increase to 3347. Within the division of Adult Continuing Education undergraduate provision accounts for 8.5% of the total university registrations while at postgraduate level

1. Enrolments in further and higher education by type of course, table 3.16. For HE courses the actual figures given are:

Year	Undergraduate Level		Post Graduate Level	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1970/71	127,000	19,000	15,000	3,000
1994/95	210,000	273,000	92,000	84,000

there are over 300 students on distance learning degree programmes. It is certainly a challenge to attempt to meet their needs!

On-line learning does not necessarily equate with distance learning but distance learning seems to be moving steadily towards becoming on-line learning. In this paper the perspectives of both academics and the students will be presented. From the academic's perspective, the authors will examine some of the problems associated with presenting core readings electronically. Additionally, there will be some discussion of more general perspectives of library provision to distance learners in England.

The Dearne Valley Project

- The Dearne Valley Project is a partnership between the University of Sheffield and local FE Colleges to create a HE Learning Network to deliver accredited University courses on-line. Academics from the partner institutions have, over a two year period, undertaken a staff development programme in the use of networked learning and the design of on-line courses. An investigation of library services needed in order to support these courses has been carried out by interviewing the staff concerned. Specific areas under investigation included the anticipated requirements of students with regard to core course materials as well as determining how to provide on-line access to databases and subject materials to support project based work. One of the researchers conducted in depth interviews with nine academics from various subject backgrounds offering courses ranging from HE certificate Level One to postgraduate professional development.

The Students: Distance learners and Libraries

- Work by researchers at the University of Sheffield examined the experience of being a distance learner and what library support the students themselves wanted. Peacock (1992) found debates in higher education on part time education paid scant attention to library provision: "Studies written from policy, provider and student perspectives neglect library issues, making only limited references to problems experienced". Changing patterns of demand require a fluid response from library staff and policies to facilitate access both to libraries and to library resources.

Unwin (1995) found that distance learners want to be like any other student - that is they want to be able to physically use a library and its resources in their own community. Part of the joy in undertaking research either independently or via a set course of study is serendipity: the ability to browse the shelves of a library and see what is there. Previous research suggests "library use plays a major part in helping distance learning students develop a student identity, as using libraries is something 'real' students do" (Unwin 1995). It is suggested that: "There can be little doubt that the numbers of students who require special library services because they live or work at a distance from their host university is growing very quickly, and this growth rate is likely to continue" (Unwin 1995).

Document delivery and Core Reading Material

- The Academic Staff Survey Report for the Acorn Project (Acorn) found that "guidance to quality texts and access to current literature were the two main roles ascribed to reading lists, although the practice of providing a structured programme of learning for students and the linking of reading lists to individual lectures were indicated".

These findings reinforce those of the academics interviewed who all recommended reading for their students. Reasons for preparing reading lists were as follows:

- "to get it past the accreditation process",

- to supply the theoretical framework in which to place the learners' own professional practice,

- to provide the basis for subsequent discussions and activities

Methods and Approaches

Working in an on-line environment did not alter the academics' attitudes towards recommended reading significantly. As one of the respondents said:

> "Whether or not I recommend reading is to do with how I think people learn, ...I am going to make the basis of my recommending reading on the quality and not where it is."

A significant percentage of the required recommended readings for these courses is not yet available electronically. One factor that library management needs to address urgently is the seamless integration and access to print and electronic information sources at a local level as well as via remote access.

Electronic short loan collections

- The main requirement of a successful electronic short loan scheme is co-operation between academics and library staff. The academics interviewed had not considered arranging electronic access to course materials. On reflection, they agreed that it would be advantageous.

Advance notice, a minimum of 4 months, is required in order to obtain copyright clearance to digitise articles or texts on a reading list. No consensus exists among publishers on charges and whether this will be a flat rate license fee, royalty payment based on usage, or permission given freely. Publishers are more inclined to give permission for journal articles than for chapters from books. The shorter the period covered by the request the more likely publishers were to agree. The eLib projects (Short Loan strand[2]) have concentrated on providing electronic access for full time students on campus, although it is recognised that provision may benefit all categories of student. Part time students will not be faced with discriminatory practices with full 24 hour remote access to the materials (Dugdale 1997).

Security of the document and the quality of the document itself are two elements in providing a rationale for choosing an electronic format for core readings. In order to retain the layout of the original, many of the publishers prefer to use a portable document format (pdf) to store materials. Many of the electronic journals that have both print and electronic copies will mount the abstracts and contents pages in html format, freely accessible over the Internet, but the articles are available only to authorised users in pdf. This format allows an accurate page representation as well as being "deemed as the most secure means of transporting documents across the Internet." (McClean 1996). The software to enable viewing of pdf documents is Adobe Acrobat which can be downloaded free from their web site[3] but is one more technical hurdle for distance learners to negotiate in order to access course materials.

The cost of providing course material electronically is a major drawback. Costs include: staff time in procuring copyright permission for each item; obtaining a clean copy to digitise; and scanning in the document itself. With the cost of the actual hardware used added in, it is more expensive than sending out study packs cleared through the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA). Moreover, photocopies of some items are still required as permission to digitise may be denied. A welcome development in this area is the agreement by some rightsholders to grant the CLA the right to provide appropriate licenses.

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2. For details and direct links to the five projects (ACORN, ERCOMS, PATRON, QUIPS and ResIDe) go to http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/elib/projects/intro.html#esl (Accessed February 1998)

3. Adobe Acrobat web site is available at http://www.adobe.com/ Accessed February 1998

Methods and Approaches

Library Support mechanisms in place: Service Policies

- In 1997 the Extended Campus Group of the American Library Association revised their guidelines for the second time since they were originally drawn up in 1980. The authors state that any "services offered should be designed to meet effectively a wide range of information, bibliographic, and user needs". These include:

  - prompt document delivery

  - reference assistance

  - computer based bibliographic and information services

  - adequate service hours

  Amongst the other needs highlighted are reliable and secure access to the computer network, co-operative lending practices, user education, the role played by proactive librarians to promote the library to the academic community and documentation.

  In a recent article Rabinowitz (1997) compares librarians to employees of the Automobile Association. Librarians provide the equivalent of roadside service, help with planning the journey along the information highway, point out the scenic routes and suggest alternative forms of transport. She concludes by stressing that the faster the maps change, the more navigators, or librarians, are needed.

Current Research: What is happening in Britain

- Research for the current study was undertaken using questionnaires, interviews and an examination of documentation from the libraries. A representative sample of libraries in continuing education departments as well as main university libraries was surveyed: in all, 36 libraries were approached with a 50% response rate. Questions determined not only the current library support offered to distance learners but also what future services will be offered.

Document delivery

According to the academics interviewed, computer based learning packages and written course material are not adequate to meet research needs at a dissertation level. Stephens and Unwin (1997) found that "sitting at home working through distance learning modules (whether in text or an electronically interactive form) was not enough" nor did students wish their academic to control their access to information.

The research within the Dearne Valley Project found that with the application of computer mediated communication (CMC) technologies, there is even more of a move towards student directed learning. On post graduate courses there is a desire to build professional communities of interest to exchange information and useful resources. A connection to the Internet provides access to a wealth of information, but quality is very variable. Users need to learn how to search effectively and critically evaluate information found. The eLib development of information gateways with links to quality sites evaluated by standard criteria benefits both the academic researcher as well as the student engaged in independent study.

Of paramount importance to academics, for their students, is access to bibliographic databases on and off campus. This reliance will not lessen as these databases move to providing links to full text articles. For example, Ovid have provided links to full text documents from either Medline or CINAHL[4]. A search can be carried out over a range of databases simultaneously with the results linked to the bibliographic record with an option to link to either the abstract or, subscription permitting, the full text article. For articles not available directly as full text the user can choose to obtain the item through InterLibrary Loan or to

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4. See for example their website available a: http://biomed.niss.ac.uk/ Accessed February 1998

order it electronically. An article ordered from a service such as Uncover or Inside Information, with direct on-screen payment by credit card, can be delivered by fax or post.

Within the subject areas covered by the survey, access to books as well as journal articles was regarded as essential. Web based forms can be used to request particular items for postal loan. However, a personally signed copyright declaration form is required for each photocopy request. Deakin University, in Australia, have sought to overcome this problem by asking off campus students to register initially with the Document Delivery Service. They receive a form electronically which they must print off, sign and return by post, authorising the Library to accept their Library Borrower Number as their 'electronic signature' for copyright purposes (McKnight, 1997).

Reference assistance

Reference assistance is offered in a number of ways: remote access to databases, reference queries answered via e-mail, and in some cases mediated searches undertaken for students. Postal loans and a photocopy service are offer by two thirds of the respondents. Only 2 respondents reported offering copies of readings in electronic form.

Remote Access

Remote access is one area where more libraries are able to increase all students' access to the library. Two thirds of the libraries in the survey offered remote login in to their system. However this was tempered by references to the OPAC being on line and therefore available to anyone who wished to view it. Consequently on line renewals were possible. True remote access however is not available at all the universities surveyed. Sheffield does have a remote access scheme, RATS (Remote Access to Sheffield[5]), which allows users to login onto the campus network. This access however does not

offer the full range of services that a user on campus would be able to access. From the library point of view a growing number of databases can be used via RATS which will be valuable for distance learners within the UK.

User Education and Documentation

The results show that only 3 of the surveyed libraries have created web pages specifically for distance learners. For many students who have Internet access this is the way to initially find information about the library services be it simply the opening hours or a tutorial on developing research skills. One obvious way to reach distance learners is to have documentation ready to be added to the information packs sent to new students. Increasingly information, particularly FAQ's, are mounted on the library's web pages.

The initial examination of web sites was quite discouraging. Libraries have simply put their paper documents up on the web and done little else with them. There are some notable exceptions where although the documents that have been mounted are descriptions of services offered they are well written and helpful for distance learners. Going beyond the UK borders, Loyola University in Chicago has a great site and provides a range of documents to assist students. Many of the Australian universities also provide very helpful sites for their distance learners.

In addition to standard handouts giving hours, resources available a number of libraries are developing self administered tutorials[6]. The eLib projects have also concentrated on learning library and Internet skills: Netskills has developed a series of tutorials and will provide direct training to HE's in England. One specific on-line interactive tutorial is TONIC.

User education and documentation can be made available from the Library Web pages together with access to on-line tutorials on information skills and

5.   Full details of the RATS service are available from their web page (http://www.shef.ac.uk/~cics/rats/index.html). As of February 27th, 1998 there 1,866 registered users of RATS.

6.   The six Library and Information Skills Tutorials developed by the University of Sheffield (http://www.shef.ac.uk/~lib/webtut/intro2.html) are an excellent starting point. The tutorials not only explain what library resource sare available but also why a student would want to use them as providing some exercises.

research methods. Conferencing systems and e-mail discussion lists allow students to contact library staff with various queries or requests for assistance. This use of computer mediated communication (CMC) technologies - provides connection between academics and students, students and other students, students and library support.

> "The danger is that in a digital library, where users may be accessing information remotely from their homes and offices, the collaborative interactions that occur in a physical library will be lost. This is unfortunate as the digital offers the opportunity not just to maintain such useful collaborations but also to support quite new kinds of collaboration, where participants are unconstrained by factors of distance and time, or indeed even the need to know who they are collaborating with."

> *(Twidale 1997)*

Other Services

Peacock (1992) reports that the University librarian's annual report for 1987-88 took as one goal for the next academic year "establishment of a special part-time collection, extension of opening hours, provision of a full service throughout all opening hours and longer periods of loan for part time students". Modest requests overall but Peacock does go on to suggest that as more electronic materials are introduced into academic libraries that a more pronounced role in bibliographic instruction will be necessary. Three quarters of those surveyed in the current research stated that they did not include computer literacy skills, study skills or Internet navigation skills in sessions with students. One respondent amplified on her response by stating that "although guidance and help would be offered in computing skills that the primary emphasis was on the literature, both print and electronic, searching skills". Adult returners require a basic grounding in both computer skills and the general library searching skills before they can effectively and efficiently use library resources.

Reciprocal arrangements for library services will also be considered: students want to use a library in their own community. By the summer of 1999 it is anticipated that a national scheme will be in place with funding from the HE Funding Council (External 1998). Details are still very sketchy but the available funding will be "to cover the recurrent costs, mainly staff related, of allowing access to researchers from other HEIs in the UK".

The future

- Librarians surveyed foresee needs and developments as varied as the libraries in which they work. Surprising only one third of the respondents felt that their workload had increased because of electronic access. For those who responded "Yes" the new responsibilities were overall on the technical side. First on the list of new work loads was equipment maintenance. Second was the training of staff, faculty and students in using the resources as well as training them in basic computing skills such as how to login.

On the list of library developments for distance learners there was very little overlap amongst the respondents. Access to more databases, particularly full text databases combined with remote access to the host library stood out as a priority. Some needs already highlighted by both Peacock and Unwin such as longer opening hours, postal loans, and photocopies of articles were mentioned by at least 1 respondent. Only two respondents mentioned extending use of a conferencing system or the use of a MOO to support students. Unwin (1995) states: "Strategies, services and administrative procedures which position the learner in relation to the library will be as important for the 'independent' learner as for any other group. It follows, therefore, that services designed with other part time students in mind, such as extended opening hours, facilities to return books before 9 a.m., telephone and postal services and reciprocal borrowing arrangements, are likely to be of benefit to distance learning students".

Conclusion

- The way forward will be combination of solutions: postal loans, photocopy services, remote access to full text databases as well as increasing emphasis on bibliographic instruction. The examination and costing of providing core readings electronically as researched for the Dearne Valley project are not insurmountable but demonstrate what problems there will be.

  "University libraries are starting to address how best to meet the needs of their increasingly diverse range of students and to introduce a variety of initiatives. In most libraries, there needs to be a shift of funding to cope with the change of practice".

  (Fleming, 1997)

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