University of Cumbria

Redefining services to distance learners: what's in a name?

Karen Tyers,
LIS Assistant,
Learning and Information
Services,
St Martin's College,
Bowerham Road
Lancaster LA1 3JD
(Soon to become the University of Cumbria)
Tel: 01524 384 4498
E-mail: MKTyers@ucsm.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the term 'distance learner' specified the distinct category of students who studied at a distance from the university or college at which they were registered. Enrolled on designated distance learning courses, and identified as distance learners on the student records system, they were entitled to specialist services such as postal loans.

Today, however, the student learning experience is changing. Remote access to information and communication across geographical boundaries enables institutions of higher education to offer flexible modes of study by means of online and independent learning. Thus they are able to include in their increasing and diverse student population many non-traditional learners of different backgrounds and personal circumstances, including part-timers, mature entrants, international students and learners 'studying at a distance'.

For a variety of reasons, whether family obligations, work commitments, time constraints or geographical location, many of our learners may rarely be present on campus. They may have little or no in-person contact with staff and may never attend formal classes, or visit the library, making the concept of the traditional 'campus-based student' less relevant to higher education institutions.

As the proportion of students not physically present on campuses increases, the balance between 'off-' and 'on-campus' students also changes. Consequently, it becomes necessary to redefine what we mean by the term 'distance learner', so that library services, and the manner in which we provide them, offer the same benefits to all learners. These services must meet – and exceed –the information needs of **all** our learners, whether they are on- or off-campus.

REDEFINING THE TERM 'DISTANCE LEARNER'

St Martin's offers a number of part-time and vocational courses, and in addition many courses have long periods of practice placements; in fact more than 50% of our 10,000 students fall into this category. This is likely to increase after St Martin's becomes the University of Cumbria from August 2007 and plays a full part in the new distributed learning network in the region.

To support our students more fully, we decided we needed to understand better what the term 'distance learner' means today, and how we might adapt our services accordingly.

What is a distance learner? To find answers to our question, we decided to investigate the following issues:

1   What criteria do other academic libraries use to determine what a distance learner is?

2   Is there a prescribed and uniform view of the term 'distance learner'? What does it mean in practice?

3   What services and support do other libraries provide for 'distance learners', over and above those they offer to non-distance learners?

A small-scale survey was conducted from October to December, to learn from others what they are doing to address the varied needs of a diverse student body. After making initial contact by telephone, a brief questionnaire was emailed to staff responsible for overseeing services and support to distance learners at 20 academic libraries.

The response rate to our e-mail questionnaire was 45%. For a fuller view of academic library policy and practice in regard to service provision and support for distance learners, the websites of a total of 27 academic libraries were visited.

Literature pertinent to the investigation was also consulted.

What we learned from our Investigation

1 Diverse criteria determine distance learner status

A SCONUL report of 2001 identifies distance learners as 'those who are separated by distance or by available time from the institution at which they are registered on a course of study'.[1] Distance learners might, therefore, be seen as:

a) students who live so far away from campus that it is difficult or impossible for them to gain the same benefits from existing 'non-specialist' services as other students, and/or
b) students whose personal commitments and/or work schedules prohibit their presence on campus at times when they might benefit from these services.

It was found that the majority of the academic institutions consulted apply various criteria to determine distance learner status, and resultant eligibility for specialist services. Furthermore, the regulations governing distance learner status vary from one institution to another; at some institutions more than one criterion applies.

Criteria determining distance learner status might include, for example:

- registration on courses where attendance on campus is either not required or infrequently required
- registration on a designated distance education/learning course
- participation in programmes incorporating work placement. Full-time students, for instance, are effectively 'distance learners' for defined periods while on mandatory work placement during their course of study
- personal circumstances or work schedules that prevent attendance, or make it difficult
- geographical distance from campus; Cardiff University information services, for example, states that a student located more than 50 miles, or one hour's travel, away from a Cardiff University library is entitled to specialist services.

Thus, it appears that criteria establishing distance learner status are no longer limited to studying at a distance, or to enrolment on a designated distance learning course. Additional criteria seem to exist that allow eligibility to distance learner status for a greater number of students than formerly.

Additionally, most of the libraries surveyed have a specific borrower status for distance learners on the library management system, enabling library staff easily to identify students who are eligible for specialist services, and to facilitate access to resources and services for these students. Indication of borrower status on Talis Alto enables library services at the University of Central England, for instance, to stop items being recalled from distance learners.

2 Diverse, non-prescriptive views of the term 'distance learner'

In applying diverse criteria to determine distance learner status and eligibility for specialist services, it follows that libraries use various terms other than 'distance learner' to describe students with flexible access needs. Descriptive terms identified in the literature and by respondents include:
- part-timers
- off-campus students
- students on placement
- students with occasional or irregular attendance
- lifelong learners
- students with disabilities
- students with special individual circumstances that may prevent attendance.

The range of terms institutions use in reference to these learners suggests that students who were traditionally distinguished as a discrete category of distance learners are today part of a larger, increasingly heterogeneous group. This expanding group embraces diverse students who engage in varying and mixed modes of learning in a manner and at a time and location that matches their particular needs and circumstances.

3 Specialist services for learners with flexible access needs

Learners with flexible access needs require – and, as tuition fees soar, they increasingly expect – timely access to a range of relevant information resources and supportive services.

In response to this demand, St Martin's learning and information services provides a range of specialist services to facilitate access to resources. Academic libraries we surveyed tend to offer a similar range of specialist services, described on

their dedicated distance learner web pages, for students with flexible access needs.

The services most commonly provided are postal book loans, postal photocopying and access to other libraries' resources through the UK Libraries Plus scheme. Some libraries (30%) also offer UK Computing Plus, giving eligible students access to a limited range of computing facilities. Other specialist services offered include:

- postal interlibrary loans
- literature searching
- dedicated distance learning collection
- book fetching
- frequently asked questions
- newsletters
- information skills training
- out-of-hours support.

Postal photocopies and postal book loans
All the libraries we surveyed offer postal photocopies of book chapters and journal articles, and nearly all (89%) provide a postal loans service.

Whereas postal photocopies are offered to all distance learners regardless of residence, few of the libraries surveyed (7%) extend their postal book loans service to overseas students.

Service charges for postal photocopying and book loans differ from one library to the next. For example, fees for photocopying might be charged per page, per article or per number of articles requested, ranging from 5p to 10p per A4 page, from 50p to £3.00 per article, item or book chapter, or £1.50 for 1–5 articles. Photocopying fees charged to overseas students are higher, as they include the costs of overseas postage.

Over half of the libraries surveyed pay the cost of postage on outgoing postal loans; learners are required to pay return postage. In circumstances where learners must pay postage both ways, fees range from £3.40 to £4.50 per item posted to an address within the UK. In the few cases where a postal loans service is offered to learners outside the UK and Northern Ireland, postage costs per item are considerable. library services of the university of the West of England, for example, quote a service charge of £14.00 per book to users outside the UK and Europe.

Postal loans and photocopies offer an invaluable service for many students absent from campus. Yet, at the majority of the libraries surveyed, circulation policies governing postage fees, fines on overdue books and recall on loans (despite

extended loan periods and provision for remote renewal) might make this means of access a costly option for students studying at a distance.

Overseas students are undeniably at a disadvantage in regard to access and costs. Access to full-text electronic information, however, helps in some measure to offset this drawback.

Postal interlibrary loans
A small minority of the libraries surveyed (7%) offer postal interlibrary loans to borrowers within the UK. This specialist service is not an option for most students with flexible access needs, therefore.

Literature searching
Literature searching, offered by four (15%) of the libraries surveyed, appears to be regarded as a service principally for learners who lack internet access, and to help bridge the gap in the provision of access to electronic databases for on- and off-campus students, allowing the latter group access to the same range of electronic resources as on-campus students. At one respondent library, however, this service has not been requested in the last five years. Possible reasons for lack of use of this service might be (a) that it is fee-based, possibly unaffordable, and/or (b) that students are unaware of this service.

Distance learning collection, book fetching
Only one respondent library indicated that it houses a dedicated distance learning collection of core texts. Four (15%) of the libraries surveyed operate a 'book fetching service': books are set aside at the student's request, for collection within a specified number of days.

Information literacy training
In addition to access to resources, students who are 'off-campus' require access to effective training to acquire information literacy skills so that they may make effective use of resources and develop independent life-long learning skills.

All the libraries surveyed have links on their dedicated distance learner web pages to freely available online tutorials such as Tonic, and many provide links to the newly launched Intute training suite, which offers subject-specific internet tutorials. Leeds also offers an online 'Watch the library video', and Sunderland provides a library induction through a PowerPoint presentation.

Specialist distance learning units, out-of-hours support
Adequate support is also essential for effective access to, and use of, resources. Remote support

for students with flexible access needs varies among libraries. It ranges from providing one staff member with particular responsibility for delivery of specialist services to a specialist unit comprising a dedicated team offering specialist services, help and guidance. Swansea's DALLAS team (distance and lifelong learners at Swansea), Napier University's NULIS distance learning service and the off-campus support team at Edgehill College in North Devon are examples of the latter.

Just over half (59%) of the libraries surveyed publish designated contact details on web pages for distance learners. Where this information is provided, making contact is simplified; learners are likely to receive faster, more personalised service than where only general contact details are published.

Few of the libraries surveyed (11%) mentioned provision of 'out-of-hours' support. Yet many learners who juggle family obligations, part- or full-time work schedules and study cannot always seek urgently needed support or guidance during daytime working hours. Of note is Edgehill, which offers dedicated telephone support to students with flexible access needs to 9 pm from Monday to Friday, and from 11 am to 6 pm on Sundays.

Frequently asked questions, newsletters
Six institutions (22%) publish 'frequently asked questions' on dedicated web pages especially for distance and part-time learners. Two of the libraries consulted, Edgehill learning services and the University of Surrey Roehampton information services, produce newsletters to keep students informed of new developments.

Services and support for other students rarely present on campus
45% of respondents reported that no special arrangements were made for other students who spend little time on campus. All the other respondents observed that services such as off-campus renewals, online document request, postal photocopying services and help-desk enquiry, all designed with off-campus students in mind, are also accessible to a wider group of students.

It is interesting to note that students who are not officially designated 'distance learners' but who spend little time on campus also take advantage of services such as those mentioned above, which were initially designed specifically for 'distance learners'. This suggests that the distinction between different categories of students and the services they require is not always clear-cut: precise distinctions between separate, traditional categories of students are disappearing. 'Distance learners' are part of a diverse and expanding group, with varied information and support needs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS

A frequently cited rationale for specialist service provision is to enable students who are unable to (or find it difficult to) access library services, to gain comparable benefit from service provision as traditional on-campus students. As Fulcher observes, 'The central issue in library support for distance learning is one of equity.'[2]

Yet it appears that not all learners might gain adequate access to resources and services to which they are entitled:

- Some library and information services' policies governing the   provision of services – for example, circulation policies, associated fines and charges – weigh against some of these learners.

- Some specialist services – such as postal loans – are denied by most libraries to some learners with flexible access needs, such as overseas students.

- Other services that are crucial to effective location and use of resources – such as information skills training – are not always targeted to meet the information skills needs of learners with flexible access needs.

- Essential services – such as out-of- hours support – are not provided by many libraries at times convenient to learners with flexible access needs.

- Learners may not be fully aware of the specialist services for which they are eligible, and so they do not take advantage of them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR POLICIES AND SERVICES

The survey underlines the realisation that the term 'distance learner' is becoming anachronistic in today's flexible learning environment. Libraries need to move away from rigidly categorising students by type of course of study to a fuller understanding of students' individual needs, and

to be more flexible in regard to student entitlements. This requires an institution-wide approach and excellent communication between all parts of the organisation.

How is St Martin's responding to this challenge? Our strategy is to concentrate on a joined-up approach, to more fully identify, understand, and provide for the diverse information and support needs of *all* our students by:

- implementing an information fluency framework that is embedded in courses and programmes

- building a closer working relationship between library, academic and support services staff to understand and support students' diverse circumstances and needs

- extending our portfolio of services to those who need it, irrespective of their course of study, for example our multi-site book request scheme and expansion of the postal loans service to embrace all part-timers and full-time students on placement; this service was formerly available only to learners registered on designated distance learning courses

- investigation of licenses for electronic resources to include non-UK learners

- adequate staff to facilitate access (physical and intellectual) to appropriate resources for all learners with flexible access needs

- provision of opportunities for appropriate ongoing training and development to staff directly involved in provision of services to learners with flexible access needs
- targeted marketing so that all learners are aware of services and support available to them.

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FURTHER READING

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