

MEETING THE NEEDS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SURREY: DiLIS

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Introduction

Much has been written over the past decade on the subject of distance learners and their information needs and recent years have seen the emergence of a large number of initiatives to help meet these. At the University of Surrey, DiLIS (the Distance Learners' Information Service) began life as a 6 month CVEAC funded project, which ran from 1997 to 1998, entitled 'Learner Support for Distance Learners'. It started to take its current shape as the 'DiLIS Project' (Phase 2) between August 1998 and July 1999. DiLIS has subsequently been embedded in the University of Surrey Library services from 1 September 1999.

The work of the department

Today there are in excess of 1500 students on distance learning courses at Surrey and of those only around 10% are regular users of the service. At present they are all taught postgraduates apart from nursing students who can use a modified version of the scheme whilst they are on placement. One full-time professional member of staff is responsible for all aspects of running DiLIS. Daily duties range from sending copies of articles and books to users to advising them on electronic resources and giving one-to-one information skills tuition. The administrative side of things involves such tasks as maintaining a database of the number of photocopies and books each student has been supplied with and the costs involved, copyright clearance of each article through CLARCS (the Copyright Licensing Agency Rapid Clearance Service - the future of this procedure is in question pending a Tribunal decision at the time of going to press) and quarterly invoicing of students for services provided.

Needs of students

Distance learning students are a group with certain defining characteristics. They can be distant from their educational institution not just by physical distance but also by such factors as time (as in the case of students living in another time zone) and language. Many are in full-time employment and/or have families to care for. Most are mature students who have not studied for some time, which may mean they need extra help with study and/or information skills. Students may need a lot of support and encouragement as they can sometimes feel quite isolated.

Information about DiLIS

When distance learners first register they are sent a DiLIS information pack by their departments which details the services on offer and how to use them. There are also web pages at: <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Library/dilis/index.htm>, which anyone can access. There are links from the DiLIS homepage to other Library pages which might be of help to students such as 'Using the Library' (which incorporates information about for example, opening hours and travel to the University) and the UK Libraries Plus site.

The needs of Surrey's users occur year-round and never really stop apart from when the University (and therefore the Library) is closed ie during the Christmas and Easter weeks. They may contact DiLIS by 'phone (there is a Voicemail facility), fax, email or post. Occasionally a student may visit campus. Most enquiries and requests are received via email. Enquiries are mainly concerning the Service, accessing information (online databases/full-text electronic journals and other web sites and services), passwords, UK Libraries Plus, access to libraries abroad, and visiting.

Services offered

The two most frequently used aspects of DiLIS are the Postal Loan Service and Article Requests. We try to provide essentially the same service to all students but there are some variations. Ordinary loan books from stock (strictly no short loan or reference) can be sent anywhere within the UK and EU. They are sent using registered postal services. There is no charge for this service although it is the students' responsibility to pay for the safe return of

items loaned. If a book has been reserved there is one week's grace within which distance learners may return their book(s). Obviously they are encouraged to renew books several days before the date due to avoid this situation arising. If a student lives elsewhere in the World or a book is only available short loan or reference then contents pages can be sent and one chapter (or 5%) of the book supplied (in accordance with Copyright legislation).

Articles may be supplied to anywhere. According to Norman (1999) "under the library regulations, librarians are required to charge the actual cost of making copies, plus a 'contribution to the general expenses of the library'." There are 2 different charges for UK/Eire or World-wide destinations (the latter more expensive). These go towards not just copying but staff time, copyright clearance and postage. In the case of an item not being available from stock then a British Library request can be made if a student wishes and is prepared to wait longer. In the future we envisage demand for copies of articles declining (it has already done so to some extent in some subject areas) as our full-text journal services increase (we currently subscribe to over 4000 titles).

Literature searches can be carried out free of charge where Internet access or remote access to a database is unavailable. The Academic Liaison Librarians usually conduct these searches as they have specialised subject knowledge.

Sometimes students arrange for a one-to-one session when they are visiting or are on campus attending a study week. Provided they have plenty of notice staff will occasionally help in the evenings or at weekends.

Conclusion

This year the Library will be conducting a user survey to evaluate the service and will be sampling both users and non-users to obtain their views on it. The aims of this exercise will be to find out:

- how satisfied users are
- how aware students are of DiLIS
- how to reach more distance learners
- how to improve the service overall

In the meantime, there is a constant demand for the service and the feedback from the users is overwhelmingly positive.

Reference

Norman S (1999) Copyright in further and higher education libraries London, Library Association Publishing