

DISTANT USERS: LOCAL RESPONSIBILITIES

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The current thrust towards supporting life long learning through widening access to further and higher education has required many educational institutions to review the support systems in place for non traditional students. In the case of distance education, key areas such as library and information services have borne the brunt of much criticism about the appropriateness of the services they offer to this type of student. In the UK, the absence of a national policy or guidelines like the 'ACRL Guidelines for distance learning library services' (1), has resulted in a piecemeal approach to this area of library provision. Although improvements are being made, progress is slow and many distance learning students remain disadvantaged because of the sheer logistics of accessing the information they require to support their studies. In the case of distance learning nurses, there is the added disadvantage of the complex relationships that can exist between the NHS libraries providing services to students on clinical placement, and the higher education institutions who are responsible for their training.

"designing and testing a DILIS with the intention of making it available to all ... distant learners, including nurses on placement."

Over the past eighteen months, the George Edwards Library, University of Surrey (UniS) have been designing and testing a distance learners information service (DILIS) with the intention of making it available to all of the University's distance learners, including the student nurses on placement. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the issues facing the DILIS team, and the possible implications these have for library services for distance learning nurses.

WHAT ARE DISTANCE LEARNING LIBRARY SERVICES

The most comprehensive definition of a distance learning library service can be found in the ACRL Guidelines (2).

"Distance learning library services refers to those library services in support of college, university, or other post-secondary courses and programs offered away from a main campus, or in the absence of a traditional campus, and regardless where credit is given. These courses may be taught in traditional or non-traditional formats or media, may or may not require physical facilities, and may or may not involve live interaction of teachers and students".

IDENTIFYING THE DISTANCE LEARNER

Without doubt the first 'challenge' that most information providers will

face at the beginning of distance learning project is defining what a distance learner is. If you take the example given by ARCL that distance library learning services support "all post-secondary programs designated as: extension, extended, off-campus, extended campus, distance, distributed, open, flexible, franchising, virtual, synchronous, or asynchronous" (3) most nurses will be a distance learner at some point in their career.

At the UniS there are two types of distance learners, those that never visit the site, and those that attend during study blocks. The time between the self directed study at home and attendance varies, and is dependent on the structure of the module. There is a fine line between part-time and distance learning students at UniS, and for the purposes of the project only students following programs that had been designated distance learning during the validation process were eligible to use DiLIS.

DiLIS

1. DiLIS is a *Pro-Active* information service, the project team try to anticipate the information needs of the students before they have to ask.
2. DiLIS is '*client-orientated*'. No one individual decided what services to offer and develop. The ones provided through DiLIS are those that were chosen by the students
3. DiLIS is about encouraging '*Information self-sufficiency*'. It provides students with the opportunity to take on responsibility for their own learning through educating them about the world of information, rather than just the world of an academic library. As information professionals we would be failing in our duty if we did not actively encourage students to investigate all aspects of information. It can be argued that through information literacy, students develop transferable skills that support life long learning and most importantly promote INDEPENDENCE.

The services offered through the project were based on the findings of a survey that investigated the information needs and requirements of the University's distance learners (4). These included:

- A web based information gateway
- A postal loan service
- A document delivery service (for items held in stock)
- Remote access to electronic information resources
- Tailored user-education programmes

POSTAL LOAN SERVICE

When developing a postal loan service, the following issues had to be addressed:

1. *Identifying the boundaries e.g. who will be eligible for the service*

Although there was universal agreement from the distance learners that a postal loan service was what they all wanted, it was widely acknowledged that time restrictions, inadequate postal systems and financial constraints would impede the success of an overseas service. Therefore, the service offered through DiLIS was restricted to students resident in the UK & Eire

1. Identifying the category of loan

At UniS, all postgraduate students can borrow ordinary loan books for a period of four weeks, with the option of renewing items providing that they are not reserved. These items were used in the service because the four weeks allowed for 10 days postage (4 days to reach the student and four to get back).

1. Who pays for what ?

Any new service costs money, at UniS, the costs of the postal loan service are divided between the Library and the student. Books are sent to students when they ask, and they pay the return cost. The books remain the responsibility of the student until they return to the Library. Invoices are generated for lost or missing books unless there is proof of postage.

1. Policing the service

There are procedures in place for DiLIS defaulters. Failure to return reserved items is dealt with fairly severely in that the borrowing rights of the defaulting student are suspended if a reserved item is not returned to the library within one calendar month of its due date. Consistent failure to return books to the Library results in the suspension of borrowing rights and the DiLIS program, and involvement of the specific Course Director.

Postal loan services & student nurses on placement

The project team are currently reviewing the way in which DiLIS can be embedded into normal library operations, and in particular how nurses on placement can benefit from the new services.

⊕ Positive initiatives like the VALNOW project could be introduced to improve the accessibility of materials. However this would require the clinical sites to have the same Information Management System (TALIS) as UniS, but the benefits would be a shared catalogue which shows the site location of an item thus giving the user the opportunity to order and reserve items from different sites. But what are the implications of this for nurses registered at the clinical site libraries but not studying ?

⊕ It can be argued that a negative route would be if a University decided to centralise the service i.e. materials are purchased and processed on the academic site, and deposited in the clinical site, with funding adjusted accordingly. Would this affect the resources available for nurses not studying ?

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Many academic institutions do not have any contractual obligations to contribute towards services for nurses not studying at the host institution, but historically NHS libraries are a user 'melting pot' where the service boundaries between different categories are often blurred. In view of this, it could be argued that higher education institutions have a unspoken moral obligation to ensure that the purchaser and provider issues between sites contributes towards a seamless and balanced service as much as possible.

DOCUMENT DELIVERY SERVICES

When developing a document delivery service, the following issues had to be addressed:

1. *What type of service is going to be offered?*

The DiLIS document delivery service (DDS) enables students to request articles from items held in stock at GEL. For items not held in stock, the request is referred to the Inter-Library Loan Department when possible. Overseas students are generally advised to use a commercial service like Uncover, UMI and the University of Minnesota because of time constraints.

1. *To charge or not to charge?*

There is a charge for this service. The Library charges for a photocopy to recover production costs "together with a contribution towards the general expenses of the library" (5). The current rate is £2 per item for a student living in the UK & Eire, and £4 per item for those living overseas. It is intended that these charges should cover copyright clearance, reproduction and postage costs. This compares favourably to commercial information services.

1. *Copyright and distance learning*

Document delivery services are inextricably linked with copyright. Like most higher education institutions, UniS has a blanket copyright license with the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA). This does not cover the 'compilation of course packs' (6), and "distance learning materials are always to be regarded as course packs, regardless of length, because they are intended for use outside the licensed premises" (7), and clearance must be obtained through the Copyright Licensing Agency Rapid Clearance Services (CLARCS) system and fees paid. On the other hand, any UK library, including a profit-based service, can copy on behalf of individual under fair dealing [S.29] (8) providing that the legal obligations are fulfilled. How and if this will change under the new EU Copyright Directive is unclear, but it would appear that library privilege and possibly fair dealing may be at risk.

Document delivery services & student nurses on placement

Without doubt, it can be argued that the introduction of the DiLIS document delivery service to placement nurses would be extremely difficult to do, and that the structure of the service is unsuitable for distance learning nurses. The current inter-library loan co-operative that

exists between the South Thames Regional Libraries provides an excellent service for the nurses, and although DiLIS will be available to them in the future, the team is skeptical about the amount of use it will get. However, improvements to the existing regional system could possibly be made in terms of speed and efficiency. For example

- UniS could supply articles through the ARIEL system, (scanning and transmitting items) to the clinical sites
- The clinical sites could in theory, use the same software to request and supply articles to each other thus improving connectivity between the sites.
- In addition to this, the clinical sites could also apply to use the LAMDA service that would give them access to a variety of excellent academic library resources. LAMDA predicts a turn-around time of 48 hours, and is cheaper than the British Library

DiLIS WEB SITE

Links to two categories of electronic information services were available through the DiLIS web site, those with unrestricted access and those with restricted access that required passwords and usernames. Unrestricted Internet services included links to the library catalogue, various subject guides, a literature searching request service and numerous subject specific web pages. In addition to this, the DiLIS web site also directs students to various commercial document delivery services such as Proquest Direct (UMI) and Uncover (Knight-Ridder). The function of the DiLIS web site is to educate students about the world of information rather than limit them to the usual academic information services, and to provide them with alternative information avenues thus encouraging "information self-sufficiency" irrespective of their subject discipline or location.

REMOTE ACCESS TO ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

"Without doubt, given the chance most doctors, nurses and other health related professionals would like access to information 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks of the year" (9)

On the whole, the open access services did not provide links to the Institutions licensed materials such as the bibliographic databases and full text electronic journals. These services are restricted and require usernames and password to access them. As far as possible, access to the University's licensed databases is controlled through the ATHENS Authentication system. Its key feature the 'single sign-on' has had a considerable impact on students who are following programmes that require no on-site attendance. Some issues surrounding remote access to electronic resources included:

1. *Access and control*
 - Who is going to use them, how could the library ensure that only authorised users access the licensed materials

1. *What type of control mechanism would be used ?*
 - Personal vs. access ATHENS account
 - Remote access using a unique Library password
 - Remote access using a personal password (not ATHENS)
 - Remote access using 'Personal ATHENS' account
1. *What type of support will be available ?*
 - From the Library
 - From the University's computer services
 - From the satellite libraries e.g. NHS libraries
1. *What happens to distance learners that do not have access to electronic facilities?*
 - Should a parallel paper-based service be offered

Remote access to electronic resources & student nurses on placement

Within the next 18 months, most, if not all, students nurses will have been registered for their own personal ATHENS account. This will enable them to access a wide range of databases that are not linked to the University's IP address, and several full text electronic journal services e.g. Ingenta Journals & Ebsco On-line. It is easy to see that in the future, access to electronic information services will not be site dependent but user category dependent, and often dictated by the license agreements of the various publishers and service deliverers.

USER EDUCATION

"... many nursing staff lack information searching skills, awareness of information resources and skills in using information technology" (10)

It is easy to underestimate the skills required to undertake a distance learning course. Being off-site and away from the main campus and its readily accessible resources is hard, being away from your colleagues is hard and not having your tutor or lecturers close to is hard. In fact DISTANCE LEARNING IS HARD. For students of all disciplines it requires considerable motivation, determination and without doubt, an element of information self-sufficiency. Time is valuable commodity for most distance learners who generally have to balance their studying between work and family commitments.

During the DiLIS project, to promote effective and efficient information seeking skills, off-peak and out of hours user education tutorials are available for the students. These generally occur on a 1 to 1 basis or in a group setting when the students are attending a study block, and they can be delivered in either the Library, the Department or off-site. All areas of 'information' are covered including library skills and

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literature searching (using stand alone, networked and Internet based databases) and Internet searching. It is essential that off-site students are given every opportunity to refresh and develop new skills that will support them during their studies e.g. the use of IT in relation to information management

User education & student nurses on placement

Nurses have a reputation for requiring more support than most traditional students in higher education. It is important to recognize that this is not because they are intellectually challenged or that they overly demanding, but because of the nature of the profession in which they work. Nursing remains a practical profession. Whilst some nurses enter the academic domain, the majority do not and simply want the qualifications they require to practice and to progress in their chosen profession.

It is easy to underestimate the culture shock that student nurses can experience between using a multidisciplinary academic library and health library. Similarly academic library staff can also experience a culture shock at the level of support required by the nurses. For nurses on placement, the development of their information skills is the responsibility of all of the service providers irrespective of their organization and location. It is in this key area of user education and information skills development that greater collaboration is required between clinical and academic sites: Health librarians and academic librarians can learn from each other. Between them they possess a formidable knowledge bank, and now is the time to share it when services that will inevitably affect resources are being developed.

CONCLUSION

In the case of Surrey, we will rapidly be reaching the position where distance learners who have been on the DiLIS project have a greater understanding of the world of information than their on-site counterparts. Initiatives like DiLIS mark the beginning of a process that recognises that the needs of individual distance learners vary considerably, and these needs require a flexible and constantly changing range of support structures. In terms of distance learning nurses, it is essential that closer relationships between the clinical sites and academic institutions are forged. Information service changes in any of these areas will inevitably have repercussions on the nurses that they serve. It is the responsibility of health, nursing and general academic librarians to ensure that the changes benefit all users, and not just the privileged few.

NB: These comments are the views of the author and not the organization

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