



FEATURE

But how do I get my books?

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But how do I get my books?

Claire Molloy, Information Adviser, Schools of Education and Social Science, explains how Education students at a distance can enhance their learning experience using the University of Aberdeen Library Service.

The School of Education at the University of Aberdeen and its predecessor Northern College have been providing courses 'at a distance' to teaching and related professionals since the 1990s. During this time the library service to these students has grown to provide them with access to up to the minute information, 24 hours a day. This article aims to show the development of that service from its origins servicing the 'in-service' courses to the current provision of information, both electronically and in traditional formats, to the distance students of the School of Education today.

'A Distance Learning student is one who does not study on campus, and who does not have immediate and easy personal access to College Library Resources.' This definition was written by the Northern College In-Service Committee in 1996. Though Northern College Aberdeen Campus has since merged with the University and the In-Service Committee has long since been disbanded, the definition can still be said to be applicable to that group of Education students who are not the 'normal' on campus full-time students.

These 'off-campus' students have potentially always been at a disadvantage and it was to make sure the disadvantage was negated as much as possible that Jean Jolly, then Senior Librarian, User Services, set out the procedures of the Library Distance Learning Service in the late 1990s.

The service was set out to facilitate access to library resources regardless of where the student was based. In the early days, as now, students lived as far away as Canada and Far East Asia but also as close as a mere half a mile off campus. The service recognised that these students had reasons, including but not limited to geographical remoteness, that made it virtually impossible to get onto campus to borrow books. Jean strongly believed it was the professional duty of the Library staff to make sure that the needs of all library users were met. It is a policy that is maintained to this day.

What was on offer?

In the early days, the Internet, electronic journals and books and online bibliographic databases were unheard of. Even the 'online' Library Catalogue was not available to anyone off campus. As a result the

service that Jean and her team offered reflected that available to on campus students and staff.

Students were given an introductory guide to the Library Service with their joining information. When they made first contact they became library borrowers and given a library card – even the overseas students, in order to make them feel like proper members of the Library. Books were posted to them, journal articles photocopied and items that weren't held at the Library we borrowed from elsewhere in order to meet their requests. All of this was (and still is!) free. Distance students simply cover the cost of returning borrowed items.

Literature searches were performed by the Senior Librarian for distance students using resources such as ERIC (Educational Resource Information Centre) and the British Education Index. These bibliographic databases were only available on CD-ROM and were for use in the Library only. Using keywords from the student relevant to their topic of interest, Jean would perform a search in order to get lists of possible useful references. These lists would be posted or faxed to the students who would tick the articles of interest to them, returning the list so that Library staff could then photocopy them or if necessary acquire them from another library. The service provided meant that anything available to students on campus could be accessed by those at a distance, albeit with a time delay.

Some students did receive library induction, but this was not the norm at this time. The idea was to encourage them to use the resources for themselves when time permitted. The number of queries the Library received in those days reflected the number of students on distance courses and the number of which had received library induction and information. In the academic year 2002-2003 the Library received 598 enquiries from distance learners with approximately 160 students taking part in on-campus organised instruction sessions. Both these figures have since risen.

Developments in the service

Library and information technology has moved on in leaps and bounds since Jean first set up the Distance Service. Since December 2001 and the merger of Northern College Aberdeen with the

University of Aberdeen, the role of Liaison Librarian for distance students has been performed by the author of this article. With the continued assistance of Library staff, firstly those at the Education Library and now from the Distance Learning Library Assistant, we have developed the service to meet the needs of students on new courses such as the Chartered Teacher and to take advantage of the latest technology.

The School of Education today offers far more than the 'in-service' distance courses of old. From undergraduate modules and degrees such as the BAs in Early Childhood Studies and Professional Development, to graduate courses such as the PGDE Secondary and Primary part-time, and postgraduate level certificates, diplomas and masters level courses, the School provides courses for a variety of professionals not only from the Education sector but also from the Social Care sector.

This variety in the types of courses and in the professionals undertaking them, has led to the development of a variety of different ways of studying within the School of Education. From face-to-face courses where students come onto campus in Aberdeen or gather at a location nearer their home as a group and undertake tutorials, through to complete 'e-learning' where all materials and support are provided online, there is something for everyone.

In order to fully support these different ways of studying the Library too has had to develop its service. Technology has helped with a myriad of resources now available from anywhere in the world with a connection to the world-wide web. Not everything is yet available electronically of course and for those items a free postal service is still provided as it was in Jean's day. Our dedicated Distance Learning Assistant will answer all requests to photocopy material (within copyright law!) and post books, and we will still borrow material from other libraries on behalf of the students if need be. However, we now have the ability to offer so much more electronically. Facilities such as the web proxy have enabled students at a distance to access electronic books and journals that previously could only be accessed by those on campus. Students can literally help themselves to more than 12,000 online journal titles and more than 22,000 electronic books. Education Distance Learners now have no excuses for lack of access to materials and can access research and further reading easily online. The way courses are now developed is partly as a result of the kinds of information available to those at a distance.

Teaching the students self-help

For many of our students e-books and web proxies are like a foreign language so in order to ensure they make full use of these resources a combination of 'online' and 'on campus' inductions are held. For those courses that are completely 'e-learning' we place the presentation notes on to a VLE (virtual learning environment) - a special closed site online - with handouts explaining how to access the information resources and who to contact if they need assistance.

For those who come on to campus for courses, we provide library inductions. These normally take the format of a workshop where we can show students the various resources and then let them try them out for themselves. Library and Help Desk staff are always on hand to iron out any problems and we also provide detailed handouts to take away.

We now provide library induction material for most of the School's distance courses. This means that whatever 'distance' course you may choose to take through the School of Education you will at some point receive a library induction either face-to-face or online. The number of inductions we do (we saw more than 250 students face-to-face last year!) could be partly responsible for the number of queries we now receive - in the region of 1,300 a year! This pleases us as it means the message about the Distance Library Service and what we have to offer is getting to those that need to hear it. We are here to help our students make the most of the resources.

The future

The service now means students at a distance have the best of both worlds. Any registered distance student with the School of Education can enjoy access to both the traditional library materials - books, copies of journals, etc. which can be posted to them - and electronic information instantly available at any time.

As for the future - well, we will endeavour to provide more of the same but we do have some ideas of how to improve things. We are considering creating interactive tutorials to guide students through the resources - again using our VLE. We have started to develop a podcast - using this technology to make library inductions available anywhere, anytime any place - if it is good enough for Terry Wogan...! Of course, we will endeavour to provide even more electronic resources and, who knows, one day our students may be able to access absolutely everything they need for an academic course online.