

# **CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE IN SPACE: LIBRARY SUPPORT TO ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

With exponential growth in online learning, an increasing number of students choose to study online through schemes such as Open Universities Australia, thereby impacting significantly on delivery of library services. Their units of study and the qualifications possible are identical to those offered on campus; the difference is that there are no barriers to enrolment. Students come from a variety of educational backgrounds, countries and cultures; provided they have access to the internet they can enrol into tertiary study. These factors raise questions of preparedness for tertiary study, educational standards, transition, attrition, the online learning environment and more. The students as an online learning community, with their particular needs and motivations, have challenged the library to look at new ways of relating with them. This paper discusses the challenges faced in supporting these students and identifies further strategies of engagement.

## **Introduction**

Online students are impacting significantly on the delivery of academic library services everywhere; in this case they are the growing cohort of students who are studying through Open Universities Australia (OUA). OUA promotes an open access philosophy

requiring no academic prerequisites to enrolling in a course or single subject, thereby encouraging students from a range of backgrounds, educational levels, standards and ages. Thanks to advances in educational technologies that have opened up the possibility of a university education to those who would never have had this opportunity in the past, more people are now able to study online.

In recognition of the increase in numbers of students enrolling through OUA, a meaningful library liaison role has emerged at Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) for these students. The paper discusses the students' needs and the challenges faced by the library in supporting their learning. Many have little or no formal educational background; the ease of enrolling and being accepted into an open access course belies the expectations and standards required of a university degree. Furthermore, it is only reasonable and fair that these students receive equitable access to information services, especially since the nature of information access has changed in recent years and as the amount of information available continues to increase (Roberts 2007)

The paper looks at the spaces the students inhabit, their learning environment, their library, and the relationships that need to develop that can encourage and enhance their learning. In other words, what worked, what didn't, challenges and plans for the future.

### **Open Universities Australia**

Owned by seven Australian universities, Open Universities Australia (OUA) commenced operations in 1993 and is the country's fastest growing provider of online higher education courses. All courses are high quality and students can graduate with a degree from the university where they register to complete their degree, although they may take individual subjects with another university provider. Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) is one of these. The University has provided this service for several years and the number of enrolments has increased greatly during this time, starting with 14 students in 2000 to 9,915 in 2009 (Austen, 2010).

OUA promotes itself on its website: as "a flexible way to study towards a university degree when you can't study on campus", welcomes students of all nationalities and in all locations around the world, and states "We remove barriers to university education including distance, time and entry requirements." (OUA).

Students applying through the traditional channels to enter university either on or off campus are expected to have completed their final year of school with reasonable results. As OUA has opened its courses to everyone regardless of educational

background it is critical to support students who may not have studied before and are lacking in confidence in their abilities.

### **Literature review**

A review of the literature some years ago (Roberts 2007) was helpful in determining how the library liaison role with these students emerged and many articles ring true to this day. The American College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services (2004) promotes the provision of services for the distance learning community equivalent to those provided for students and faculty located in a traditional campus setting and remains a focal document. Yang's article (2005) examines the extent to which US Association of Research Libraries (ARL) are providing services to their distance education library patrons, and also looks at additional responsibilities, opportunities, and challenges encountered by academic librarians in serving distance learners.

Increased access to technology has altered the way student's study, while the variety of online information available has widened the potential resource base for all students (Roberts 2007). Buchanan, Luck and Jones (2002) assert that the virtual university environment provides librarians with new opportunities to contribute to the educational process.

Liu and Yang (2004) offer a cautionary note and quote user studies that show a worrying pattern of under utilisation of the home institution library, with convenience often being cited as the main reason for choosing other information sources. Liu and Yang refer to this behaviour as the principle of least effort. This is even more intriguing when considering current technology, where a click or two of the mouse eliminates the physical distance in a matter of seconds (Liu & Yang 2004, p. 24).

The literature also highlights other problems associated with liaising with distance students. Many librarians don't know who their clients are, making it difficult to plan outreach programs or promote library services. Jurkowski's (2003) research found that services to distance students are not as ideal as the librarians wished, and that there was plenty of room for improvement. Areas to focus on were identified as needs assessment, bibliographic instruction, overcoming administrative conflicts, and campus politics.

Jones (2002) recommends the building of relationships; further support for this view is conveyed in Lillard's (2005) article on the marketing of relationships to promote the use of customised library services for online students. Lillard suggests that we ignore this at our peril, the danger being that other professions and disciplines may become the information providers and leave us behind. In many ways this paper is about

relationships – with staff, with the students, with other library staff. It certainly helps to know who the students are, the nature of their educational background, their needs, becoming part of their learning community, and fortunately in this instance that is the case.

It also doesn't hurt to be aware of the learning styles of the students. With the wide variety of characteristics and age range perhaps it's not so important to consider the needs of the net generation. Lippincott's chapter in Oblinger (2005) refers to the net generation of students in libraries and Costello (2004) identifies learning characteristics of gen X and Y and offers some guidelines. OUA students may well be from the X and Y generations, but many of them are older and cannot be assumed to be digital natives. However, the short attention span, reluctance to memorise, low boredom threshold characteristics attributed to gen X and Y are useful features to bear in mind whatever the age or experience of the online student – or any student.

## **The People**

### ***Online students; qualities, challenges, numbers***

The growing number of students alone creates a significant impact on library service delivery at SUT, and their particular characteristics even more so. A typical OUA student may be under prepared, under educated, lacking in confidence, pressed for time, a mother with small children, a working parent, a person with disabilities. Some are incarcerated and with no internet access, others are working on second degrees. A high proportion compared to on-campus colleagues have disabilities. Their age range is also far more varied; in short they are far more extreme than on campus where the selection and entry process moderates the intake, and they are also often less familiar with more formal educational institutions, although highly motivated for whatever reason.

People who have been marginalised in the past are now able to access education; those who weren't able to stay at school for some reason are now able to have a try. A survey of household use of technology reported that in 2007 – 8, 67% of Australian households had home access to the internet, quadrupling the percentage reported in 1998 (ABS 2008). Technology, combined with social/economic reasons for improving prospects with tertiary education may be the main drivers for the increasing enrolments.

The students with their diverse backgrounds need all the help they can get. Although highly motivated initially, many lack confidence and skills and can very soon become discouraged. Attrition rates remain quite high, but not as much as they once were. The

last two years in particular have seen an increase in the amount of study support offered to each student.

### ***Academic Staff***

Teaching staff may be ongoing academic staff, but are more often employed on a casual or sessional basis. To address this sessional nature of the staffing, a new tutor induction program is run a few times a year and includes a library component. A quick demonstration of the library website shows staff what is available to them and their students, and alerts them to services such as customised online library tutorials. They are offered assistance with link checking, participation in discussion threads, assistance to students, and purchase of extra copies of text books. Each staff member receives an email reminding them of this service before each teaching period.

### ***The Librarian***

The question of library liaison to these students was partially answered in 2007 when the library received funding to provide a service to them. A liaison role was created and at first it was thought that tensions may arise over ill defined boundaries of on- and off-campus liaison. There were many questions about how the role might develop. The aforementioned literature review assisted in determining how the role would emerge, and in practice it has worked well. Collaboration with on campus liaison librarians has been critical. In the interests of sustainability it has not been possible for one person to do everything, considering the number of units offered with a new teaching period four times a year.

Up to thirty multidisciplinary units are offered by the university each teaching period, of which there are four a year. Between 1600 and 3,500 students are now enrolling each period. The library must work smart and use whatever resources are available, including making the most of what has already been prepared for on- campus students, by adapting the material to suit online delivery. The following outlines some experiences in liaising with these students.

### **In the space**

Being part of the student's learning space is essential. The liaison librarian had to find a way of being there for them that made her just as accessible as she was to the on - campus students. On-campus students generally visit the library and ask questions in person; online students need to feel just as comfortable with the library's virtual space – that is, the website. The website is continually evolving, attempting to be all things to all users and it does this reasonably well. An intuitive, friendly virtual space is vital,

especially considering that for many students this is the only way they will be using the library and its services.

2010 sees a new search and discovery system that changes everything. SUT library is endeavouring to open up the website, recognising that students have become accustomed to searching Yahoo and Google without hindrance. To make it more interactive, a library blog commenced in January 2007, along with RSS news feeds. Searching databases creates a challenge to students who are used to finding information a mere click away, so they often just don't bother (Liu & Yang, 2004). This applies to both on- and off-campus students; certainly opening up the library website is good for both. OUA students have their special part of the library website that explains their library service to them. A Google Analytics report informs library staff that they visit frequently, and the ensuing requests confirm that they also make good use of it.

Although the website plays its part in the virtual learning space it has also been valuable to explore other ways of reaching out and relating to the students. All library staff took part in a 23 Things project in 2007 as part of their staff development plan (Carlsson 2008). Newly empowered with the knowledge and use of Web2.0, the liaison librarian created a Facebook group and made plans for a Second Life library island and customised online orientation and library tutorials. Initially there was some pressure to go 2.0 from both library management and reading the literature, however more recently there has been a slight easing of this. Being more of a digital immigrant than a native, the librarian was reluctant to use technology just because it was there, preferring to wait and evaluate first rather than jumping straight in. The best practice at present seems to be that of examining each application for value and enhancement.

Apart from the library website, possibly the most important space has been a more visual presence in Blackboard unit websites with a library discussion thread included in many of them. One unit in the current teaching period has over 60 threads in the discussion and the teaching period isn't finished yet.

One trend that continues to interest library staff across the five campus libraries of this university is that many OUA students like to visit the libraries in person; in most cases this will be the one closest to their home location. This came as a pleasant surprise to many library staff, considering all the online resources available through the library and their Blackboard websites.

Previous to OUA, online students were generally those who lived some distance from any campus, choosing to study online because of this. OUA students choose to study online for many reasons, and may live in the next street. An administrative decision on the part of the university some years ago means that OUA students don't receive a

student ID card. As a consequence, the library had to develop clear cut, simple procedures so they could borrow, regardless of which campus library they visited.

Apart from their desire to visit the library buildings, the question arose whether there was something else going on. Perhaps the students just wanted to be in the libraries and among other students rather than by themselves in front of their computers, communicating in their virtual world with their virtual tutorial and their virtual library. This led to thinking about how to relate better with them in their virtual world. Would the Web2.0 applications mentioned previously actually be useful? Or would they be more of a hindrance than a help?

### **Connecting**

Having reached into their virtual spaces, it has been discovered that in the interests of sustainability for the library staff and empowerment for the students, the importance of developing relationships without necessarily creating a culture of dependence. Any liaison librarian aims to encourage independent learning and uses any opportunity available to provide students with the tools to do this and this is important for distance students as well. A slight tension has developed. Important as it is to be warm and welcoming in an introductory letter (more about this later), in the library's Blackboard presence, and in developing a relationship that encourages the students to request assistance any time they need it, it must be done without creating dependence or neediness. Quite apart from being unhelpful to the students in the long term, it becomes an unsustainable workload.

Orientation to the library service is the first means of relating to the new students. Currently this is by means of a welcoming letter (mentioned above), a form of orientation that alerts the students to their special library service and the part of the library website where they can request mail delivery of books, and contact staff for assistance. This may seem a small effort in comparison to the orientation program for on campus students but it has been effective in terms of response such as information inquiries, requests for book loans and other assistance.

The library offers a postal delivery service of library books. A book budget allows for extra copies of popular texts to be purchased, which is especially helpful when the unit is taught on- and off- campus simultaneously. This is a popular, well-utilised service, initially set up by the liaison librarian and is now operated by lending staff. There is nothing new about this; off campus library services have been doing this for years. However it's worth noting the continuing popularity of the service considering our digital world and the instant availability of database articles and e-books online.

The library's online inquiry service comes in the form of a cross campus team of reference librarians who are rostered to respond to email and SMS queries in a timely manner. The graphical link for the service occupies good real estate on the library home page and the service is well utilised by on and off campus students alike. All OUA students are supplied with the contact details of the service and also of the liaison librarian, resulting in many emails to both. Often there are referrals from a teacher, either in the form of email or phone conversation. It has been important to be aware of the assignments and their due dates because it becomes very busy with queries to the library at those times. The number of email queries from OUA students directly to the liaison librarian went from 130 in 2007 then to 150 in 2008 and on to 230 for the first 10 months of 2009. Phone queries have not been counted, nor have the queries to the online reference service.

Inclusion in Blackboard has already been alluded to; eight units include library input to a greater degree than the rest. Two have lectures recorded on Lectoria or Camtasia, others have PowerPoint tutorials, "Any questions for our librarian" discussion threads, and a more customised welcoming letter via a Library tab. Although a time-consuming responsibility to check the discussion threads on a regular basis, inclusion in this space has been an invaluable means of connecting with the students. At certain times, such as at the start, end of each teaching period, and at assignment time, this may be done daily but generally it may just be three times a week or less.

### **Plans for the future**

Currently, plans for the future include development of a series of online orientation modules. Recently, a series of these was prepared for a group of students in Singapore and feedback gathered from the teaching staff about their usefulness. A welcoming video is followed by three modules:

1. Logging in, the MySwinburne portal, webmail and password management,
2. Introduction to Blackboard LMS,
3. Introduction to the library service.

Development of something along these lines for OUA students will go a long way towards equity with on-campus orientation and plans are being made for this now.

An educational technology project is under way, looking at software suitable for delivering online orientation modules. Website statistics from Google Analytics indicate that students are using the current generic online tutorials. The library is now working on the assumption based on this evidence that it's worth while preparing a new set of

generic online orientation tutorials. The team is looking at content and suitable technology, probably a vox pop video, and there are plans for some tutorials to go live from March 2010.

The new search and discovery system now makes the library look a lot more like Google and this went live in January 2010. Moving from an end of life, standard library system to a new generation system with much enhanced functionality, users will be able to create tag clouds, write reviews, and interact with the system in others ways – as well as searching for information of course.

Second Life or something like it, although on hold, remains a possibility. Initially considering the idea but discarding it, assuming that it was inaccessible to many because of the hardware requirements the liaison librarian became inspired after reading Guest (2007). She then considered how it could be used by people with severe physical disabilities in a way that could liberate them from their bodily frailties. They could fly or move virtually the way they did in their minds.

At the suggestion of a few offshore students, the liaison librarian installed Skype on her work computer and found that it worked well for those few. The intention is to publicise this more in future.

### **What has worked well**

Several things have worked well. The welcome letter to the students, ongoing contact with academic staff, the special part of the library website and the mail delivery service have all been determined successful, judging by the increase in requests for books and queries for information or assistance to either the online reference service or to the liaison librarian and, occasionally, other library staff.

Liaising across multidisciplinary subjects could possibly have created tensions with subject liaison librarians but it hasn't. Collaboration with subject liaison librarians on online tutorials and digitised lectures has allowed the creation of much better quality material as they spring ideas off each other.

The Blackboard LMS discussion threads have been especially well utilised around assignment time and it has been very important to be part of the student's learning space in this way. It has increased the workload however, being enrolled in every unit because ongoing credibility means that the threads must be monitored and responded to promptly.

Any search of the catalogue will bring up a significant number of ebooks, thanks to the ever growing e-book collection. Initial resistance to these has evolved into a more

grudging acceptance that becomes less so every teaching period. The slow take up of this resource was surprising, considering the instant gratification of reading online in an instant rather than waiting a few days for the hard copy to arrive in the mail, but probably reflects the initial reluctance of many to on-screen reading.

### **What hasn't worked as well**

Surprisingly, a Live Chat reference service didn't work and due to low demand this service ceased mid 2009. The software used was Live Person and both operating staff and users (judging by the exit surveys) were very happy with the service and the way it operated. Possibly the main reason why the service didn't take off was that the ITS Department did not allow the use of MSN or any of the applications preferred by the students. Instead, they had to come to the library home page and click on the graphic. Nor was a widget installed in the student portal, or on the Blackboard page. Hours of operation were also limited due to the constraints of staff availability.

The Facebook experiment wasn't successful either. After being told by an online student that the Blackboard LMS was old technology, the liaison librarian created an OUA Facebook group, thinking that it would be inundated but this was not the case. The group remains to this day with about five members. Perhaps the fact that most OUA students are more digital immigrants than native explains this. Most of them are not immediate school leavers and may not be part of the demographic that commonly uses Facebook.

### **Challenges**

The biggest challenge is that of sustainability. Managing the volume of requests from staff for online tutorials and the ever growing number of students over four teaching periods each year means that there is no down time. Every three months, year round, there is a new group of students with their accompanying fears and needs.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has related just one institution's experiences from the perspective of providing a meaningful library service to these students, but in doing this has drawn on the experiences of others who provide services to online students. The library team continues to support the learning needs of online students and the staff who teach them in the ways that only it can. Being part of the scaffolding in the development of online learning communities and being accessible to isolated students who may lack confidence and skills goes some way towards keeping these students engaged. Furthermore, the embedding of information literacy programs in some of the first year

or introductory units may achieve the purpose of equipping beginning students with skills that allow them to manage in the online environment.

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