

Distance education: The future of library and information services requirements

Glenn Fulcher and Debbie Lock

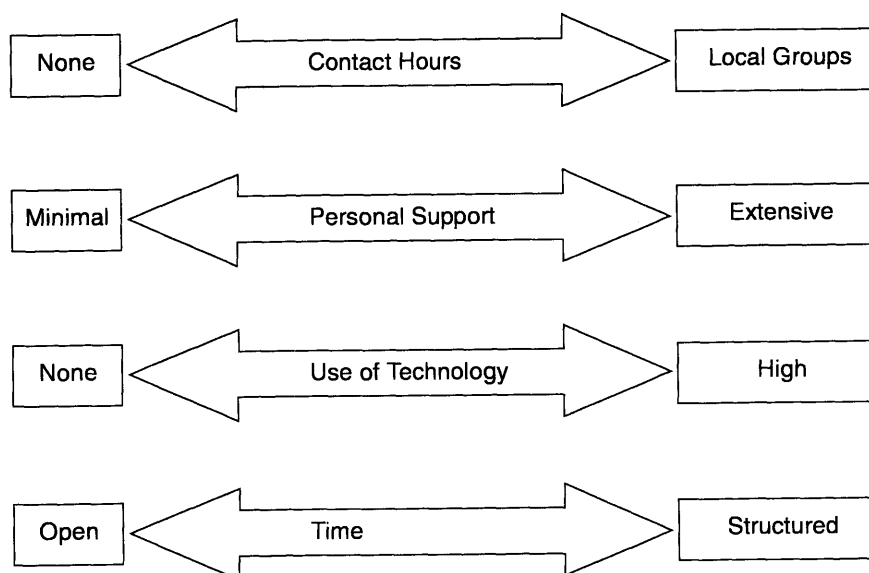
This paper considers the role of library support for distance learning activities at the University of Surrey, with specific reference to the MA in Linguistics (TESOL) and the MSc in English Language Teaching Management. These courses represent a major challenge to support services for distance learners, as the students have no face-to-face contact with staff, and most of them live and work overseas. Firstly the courses are described as operating along a number of clines that define a distance learning operation, and the issue of resource support is considered. We then turn to the role of the library in supporting distance learning students, and consider the ways in which the role of the library in distance learning programs is expanding and changing to meet the challenges of the future. The specific example of the Distance Learners' Information Service (DiLIS) of the George Edwards Library (GEL) is presented as an example of good practice.

Distance learning at the English Language Institute

The MA in Linguistics (TESOL) and MSc in English Language Teaching Management are provided by the English Language Institute (ELI) of the University of Surrey on a distance learning basis. These two programs are unusual in that there are no residential requirements and no required off-site contact between learners and tutors. Further, most learners are overseas, and the student population is spread over 42 countries. These courses represent the greatest possible challenge to library and information services support for distance learners.

Distance learning comes in many forms, and the Surrey programs could be described along a number of clines. The most obvious are those of degree of contact hours between learners and teachers (either at the home institution or some remote site), the degree of personal support built into the system (involvement of teachers with tutoring, marking and feedback), and the level of use of technology in course delivery. These are set out in figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1
Clines in distance learning systems



It should be acknowledged that many institutions attracted to distance learning assume there will be no or few contact hours with students, a minimal degree of personal support, and a significant use of technology. There is an inference that large numbers of students can be processed by few staff, with 'automatic' teaching and learning taking place through computer packages of varying kinds. In other words, distance education is thought to save money.

This institutional myth sits in sharp contrast to what is known by those practitioners actively involved in distance learning programs, who know that it is frequently a labour intensive activity that generates costs of its own. Distance learning is not a cheap option.

The MA in Linguistics (TESOL) and MSc ELTM involve no contact hours, as there is no direct tutoring. Face-to-face contact between staff and students is limited to individual tutorials that are given as options when staff go on lecturing or marketing trips, or to ad hoc visits to the university by students visiting or resident in the United Kingdom. Such visits normally take place during the summer months when students are on vacation. The programs are designed to recruit individuals from anywhere in the world without the provision of local support. However, the present situation represents a point in an evolutionary process. In the past, the ELI organised external centres catering for groups of students in Hong Kong, Israel, Abu Dhabi and Greece. These groups were facilitated

by a local co-ordinator (Coniam 1993), and the Hong Kong and Abu Dhabi groups were further supported by local resource centres set up in the early 1990s.

These centres were not cost effective because of the need to pay qualified local tutors, maintain banks of resource materials external to the university, and maintain a critical number of students in groups moving at roughly the same speed through the course. Current courses that operate with external centres need to charge significantly higher fees than those of the University of Surrey. In deciding whether to operate at the 'no contact hours' or the 'local groups' model, a number of factors therefore need to be considered:

- *Cost:* Running external resource centres and paying tutors is costly, and this requires a higher fee level.
- *Perception of quality:* Some students may think that a program with a locally taught component and/or resource centre is of greater quality than one without this component. For students whose learning style requires direct contact with others, this may be a serious factor to consider when choosing a course; for the most part it is a matter of perception of quality and therefore relates more to marketing strategy in some countries, rather than actual quality.
- *Quality of provision:* In contrast to perception, it is essential that any local tutors employed to support off-site groups *would be appointable as members of staff at the institution awarding the qualification.* Whilst this may sometimes be the case, and certainly was in the case of the early University of Surrey groups, it is difficult to maintain such a criterion for extended periods of time.

The resource centre at the British Council in Hong Kong was rehoused in the University of Surrey library in 1998, whilst the materials in Abu Dhabi have been left for the use of a local college. No future maintenance of this collection is planned.

It is therefore essential that the Surrey programs have more extensive personal support for individuals. The centrepiece of this support is the role of the distance learning personal tutor. Each student recruited is assigned a personal tutor who is the first point of contact for any problems that might be encountered during the course. The tutor monitors student progress, provides advice on how to tackle assignments, and gives any initial feedback that may be required on the outline of assignments to be completed. The extent to which the personal tutor is used is largely dependent upon the needs of the student. At one extreme, a student may be entirely self-motivated and independent, asking for little advice, help or assistance. At the other, there are students who regularly contact their tutors for support. On the second cline, therefore, the Surrey programs can be classified as extensive with regard to personal support.

On the third cline identified in this section, the Surrey programs are somewhere in the middle of the technology cline.

Both courses are structured in the following way:

- Eight compulsory core modules carrying 15 credits each. After the first four modules (60 credits) a student may exit the program and be awarded a Certificate. After the eight core modules (120 credits) a student may exit and be awarded a Diploma.
- Two option modules from a wide choice carrying 15 credits each on the MA/MSc stage of the program.
- Dissertation of 12,000 words for the MA or a research project of 8,000 words on the MSc carrying 30 credits.

On acquiring 180 credits, a student is awarded the MA in Linguistics (TESOL) or the MSc in ELTM.

The modules provided are text-based, although some of the modules have associated audio tapes and videos. No textbooks are provided with the modules. The students do, however, have access to:

- An asynchronous discussion list (TESOL-L) that provides a forum for students to discuss issues relating to their studies. This list is open to both current students and graduates, and there is active participation by both groups. The list is also used for the sharing of bibliographic information. Students in university settings have been known to offer to copy and fax articles to other students. Some students have also offered for sale over the list books that they no longer need.
- A synchronous web-based chat facility where students can meet to talk about program related matters without the participation of the tutors. This facility is less widely used because of the geographical (and hence time zone) spread of the students.

Together, these two facilities provide students with the opportunity to interact. Since their introduction, the feeling of isolation that can often arise in true distance learning programs of this nature have decreased significantly, resulting in a much lower drop-out rate than had previously been the case.

For each module the student is provided with a paper-based module text, and a relevant bibliography. The bibliography comes in two parts: a specific module bibliography prepared at the time the module was written, and a general bibliography broken down into module areas that is updated every six months. The purpose of the general bibliography is to ensure that students are aware of the latest publications in a field and can draw on them in writing each assessed assignment. It is expected that the student will acquire additional articles and books to supplement the module text, and a range of additional reading is considered important when the assignment is marked.

Finally, we consider the cline of open and structured learning with regard to time. The MA in Linguistics (TESOL) was introduced in 1989 as an open learning MA. The only time restriction was that the program should be completed within six years from the starting date. This was in keeping with the view that distance learning should allow students to have control over 'when, where, how and at what pace they learn' (Clark & Store 1998). Under this system, just over half the students submitted only two or three assignments within the first four years of study, leaving most of the work for the final two years. One of the most frequently cited reasons for the slow production of work was lack of bibliographic resources, even in Hong Kong, where resources were made available. The effect on the distance learning system was that:

- A 'bubble' of students passing through the system built up in 1995/96, all needing to complete within a year and being far behind. This led to increased staff workloads as additional tutors could not be employed to deal with the bubble. Indeed, it became impossible to plan workloads, which fluctuated from some staff having little to do for long periods and then spending every working minute marking assignments or supervising dissertations.
- Fees set in 1989/91 were not adequate to cover the cost of staff in 1995/96, meaning that the program was underfunded. In fact, most of the income had already been spent in keeping staff employed, resulting in the undesirable situation of having an outstanding teaching commitment for which there was no financial resource.
- As study was intermittent, many of the students lost momentum and motivation, leading to dropout rates as high as 33%.

The lack of comparable data on open learning systems makes it difficult to judge whether this experience is similar to other comparable programs. However, in 1992 the Surrey program was changed from open learning to structured learning, requiring students to complete each module in a period of two months, and submit the final dissertation after a maximum of 27 months study. Simultaneously, strict quality control procedures were introduced, and have been constantly improved and monitored over the years (Mann 1998; Gray 1998). The result has been a dramatic decrease in dropout rates to around 5%.

The most common reason for students falling behind with the program schedule, apart from that of 'personal or family tragedy' (to be expected from a post-experience course), remains inability to obtain bibliographic resources.

The next cline that we investigate is therefore that of the degree of learner support in terms of bibliographic and library resources. The Draft Guidelines on Quality Assurance for Distance Learning (QAAHE 1998) treat support mainly in terms of the contact between learners and the

providing institution and its staff, including arrangements for providing appropriate feedback to learners. It does, however, state that learners need to be told about the 'availability of networks and frameworks through which the providing institution can give support to students at a distance'. At no place in the documentation, however, is the role of support from the institution's library mentioned. Even in current systems-based distance learning theory, libraries are given little attention. One key text by Moore and Kearsley (1996, p. 178), devotes only two thirds of a page to the issue, and this section of the book suggests that students use public libraries or, failing this, the institution provides 'book boxes'. The authors add that this may be inappropriate for postgraduate students who require more specialised materials, and suggest 'on-line access, microfiche or CD-ROM, circulating collections, faxing articles...' with the addition that 'this is a major challenge for the designers and administrators of distance education for graduate-level programs'.

Indeed, the issue of learner support in terms of materials is most frequently treated in terms of the amount of material sent to the learner as part of the 'learning package'. It is common for each module within a program to have a text associated with it, as is the case at the University of Surrey. This is often written especially for the course, and can be delivered on paper or electronically (either on CD-ROM or on the World Wide Web). Additionally, or sometimes instead of the module text, the institution may provide books that are costed into the price of the program. Less frequently, a collection of readings is sent. This is normally a collection of key articles for the module, bound and sent as a separate paper document to be read in conjunction with the module text.

Where the module text is not a stand-alone document and no additional materials are provided by the institution, learners are encouraged to find other sources. The ELI has discovered that the following solutions have been the most successful:

- Use of British Council libraries where available (this solution is becoming more problematic as the British Council closes or reduces the size of its overseas libraries due to cuts in funding).
- Use of local university libraries with good stocks of applied linguistic or management texts. This is the preferred solution in countries like Japan where there is good provision. In other locations like Morocco or Sudan this is not possible.
- Use of commercial article delivery services like:
 - CARL Uncover
 - University of Minnesota Document Delivery
 - UMI Infostore
 - Resource Sharing Service, University of Washington Libraries

- Use of bookshops that allow electronic or fax ordering, such as:
 - Blackwell's Extra International Mail Order Book Service
 - Dillons Bookstore
 - Heffers
 - The Internet Bookshop
- Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) document delivery service.

Whilst these sources are valuable there is nevertheless a perception on the part of the students that the University has a responsibility to offer its own service, designed specifically to meet their needs. This is true amongst those students who have the technical expertise to use commercial services as well as those who do not have access to on-line resources. This need is not surprising, as a service offered by the providing institution is more likely to be targeted at the specific course content and learning objectives of the programs.

There is therefore a great potential for forward looking libraries to make an impact not only on support for distance learners, but also in the development of new models of distance learning support.

The role of the library: Resources and beyond

Distance learning is primarily about access to educational opportunities for those learners who do not wish, or who are not able, to attend programs offered on-site. This is not to say that distance education is 'second best' in any sense, even though some authors maintain that '...the fact remains learning is essentially a social activity...' and should contain face-to-face contact wherever possible (Brophy 1998). Indeed, it is one of the frustrations of distance tutors that the use of the term 'non-traditional' as applied to distance learning is often perjorative (Fulcher 1998).

There are many advantages to distance learning programs that are not taken into account in current commentaries. The most obvious of these, in the context of teacher education programs, is the ability to apply what is learnt directly to the classroom, and to conduct research for assignments or a dissertation that has direct and immediate relevance to the student's working environment. For example:

- *Phonetics*: Record five minutes of a learner speaking English, make a phonetic transcript and identify the learner's pronunciation problems. Design an activity that will help the learner to be better understood by a native listener.

- *Discourse analysis*: Record one of your lessons and identify the patterns of interaction within the classroom. Do you encourage a range of interactions that encourage language acquisition? What question types do you use to elicit learner talk? Do learners have the opportunity to use a range of speech acts other than simply answering questions?
- *Language testing*: State explicitly the desired learning outcomes of a course that you currently teach and, with reference to the literature, design, pilot and critically assess a language test that would satisfactorily meet the needs of the learners.

These assignments could not be undertaken in an on-site program, as the students would not have access to the classroom and the primary data required. The practical applications of the distance learning program are therefore immediately implemented, and teaching is reinforced. However, the need to access the literature and apply theory to practice is where the distance learning program has most frequently failed to support the student.

The central issue in library support for distance learning is therefore one of equity. While distance learning brings advantages in applied disciplines such as education, if the program requires additional reading and the application of theory to practice, it is unreasonable to expect distance learners to survive entirely on their own initiative. Universities and other distance learning providers ought to provide library services that make the distance learning experience as comparable to on-site provision as possible.

One of the problems resides in the fact that academic tutors have not worked sufficiently closely with library staff, and library staff have seen their role as maintaining and enhancing provision for on-site students. Contact between academic staff and library staff is mostly limited to tutors sending reading lists for the next academic year, and expecting the texts to be available as and when needed. This traditional view of the library, and the relationship between the library and the academic departments is simply not tenable when it comes to distance learning. This requires a shift in thinking on the part of both tutors and library staff. Creth (1996) puts it this way:

...librarians should be seen as part of the *solution* – contributing to quality education, rather than as part of the *problem* – contributing to escalating costs. Librarians need to be bold and imaginative in defining their role and decisive in acting upon it. They should be visionary in conceiving of the present and in imagining the future, and they should be willing to take the risks inherent in translating their vision into action even though many in the academic community may be as wedded to tradition and what is comfortable as are many librarians.

This sentiment is equally true of academic staff moving into the area of distance learning provision. Nevertheless, in well run distance learning programs the library should be seen as a key provider of information and training, no less important than the tutors and program designers. In other words, the library should be fully integrated into distance learning provision.

This kind of vision on the part of the library and tutors is clear in the development of the Distance Learners' Information Service (DiLIS) at the University of Surrey. In a recent survey of what students expected of distance learning provision, one quotation from a student sums up the general view: 'give the student the feeling that s/he is not alone out there' (Fulcher 1998, p. 7). DiLIS is a key component in showing the student that there is an infrastructure that provides the support the learners need, and gives the security that they are indeed not alone in any of the tasks they are asked to carry out. DiLIS is a clear example of what can be done by a visionary library working in close contact with program tutors.

Library Support for Distance Learners Project – Phase 1

Until recently the George Edwards Library (GEL) had no defined policy aimed at supporting distance learners: they had access to the same services and facilities as their on-site counterparts without the benefits of always being able to access them physically or electronically (Lock & Nordon 1998). The Library Support for Distance Learners project was a six month Continuing Vocational Education (CVE) funded initiative which ran from October 1997 until April 1998. The objectives of the project were:

- to identify the library/information needs of the University of Surrey's distance learners;
- to identify a wide range of new/modified library services that would satisfy those needs;
- to assess the cost implications of the proposed services.

Two categories of distance learners participated in the research: students who rarely, if ever, visit the university and students who primarily work at home but may attend occasional study days. Between November 1997 and January 1998, 520 distance learners from various subject disciplines were surveyed using questionnaires, focus groups and interviews: ELI students accounted for 23% of the sample frame. The overall response rate was 40% of which 18% were ELI students. The results and comments from the survey confirmed the belief that the services being offered by GEL were inappropriate to meet the needs of the ELI's distance learners.

Results

Even though the investigation revealed that the majority of ELI students were innovative information seekers who used a variety of information services, it was widely acknowledged that most had experienced obstacles accessing relevant information to support their studies. Most comments concerned the lack of guidance provided by the Library about general information issues such as purchasing information, and the difficulties they faced accessing alternative academic libraries. All of the respondents commented that to be successful it was important to know who were the most reliable publishers and booksellers for their subject, and where and how books and articles could be bought. Most ELI students were either directed to what were considered reliable information sources by ELI staff, or came across them through 'trial and error' and 'word of mouth'. The Library was rarely consulted.

The current impetus in distance education is having a direct effect on demand for improved accessibility to information resources for all students, irrespective of their geographical location. There is little doubt that improving accessibility to information resources will require greater collaboration between public, private and academic libraries than currently exists (Heery 1996; Stephens 1996; Unwin 1992). Like the UK, many countries are feeling the impact of financial restrictions on higher education facilities. In the survey, a high proportion (64%) of the ELI students living overseas reported that they were experiencing increasing difficulties visiting and using their local academic institutions because of the concerns of the host library about overuse of facilities by non-associate members:

'The other day I went to Temple University (Tokyo), I found a well stocked library, with helpful staff and cheap document copying. A possible problem came to light in my discussion with the librarian at Temple who said that the *University was concerned about overuse of their facilities by 'guest members'*. This suggests to me that Surrey should look into some kind of reciprocal arrangements with institutions. As things stand, when I go into a university in Tokyo, I feel like an unwelcome intruder rather than a fellow budding academic.'

The students' response was strongly in favour of the university setting up official reciprocal arrangements between the various library and information services which would place their 'access rights' on an official footing.

Like most academic libraries today, GEL is developing more services that can be provided via the Internet. The GEL web site provides links to the Library catalogue, online bibliographic database services such as the Bath Information Database Service (BIDS), and subject-specific Internet

resources. The function of the web site is to improve accessibility to some library services. When questioned about Internet access, 68% of all ELI distance learning students claimed to have Internet access. The high percentage of students using the Internet confirmed the view that Internet-based information services can provide distance learning students with opportunities similar to those of their on-site counterparts. The students who did not have Internet access (32%) claimed that this decision had been influenced by:

- the cost of being online;
- restrictions due to the social and political beliefs of a country;
- limited access due to the infra-structure of a country.

Comments from the students about the type of services they would like to see GEL introduce revealed that a wide range of services are required if the Library is to support distance education effectively (table 1).

'It would be a great help if I could access catalogues and order articles which could be faxed or sent to me in Namibia.'

'Sources for access to linguistics journals and relevant Internet web site addresses.'

Although ELI students ranked a postal loan service as the most useful supporting information service, it was generally acknowledged that time restrictions, inadequate postal systems, and financial constraints would impede the success of such a service.

TABLE 1
Future service preferences (ranked)

Position	Service (non-UK based students)	%	Service (UK-based students)	%
1st	Postal service	48.7%	Postal service	41.3%
2nd	Access arrangements	27.3%	Remote access searching facilities	24.8%
3rd	Photocopying & fax services	23.5%	Extended loans	23.4%
4th	Help-Line	20.4%	Help-Line	19.8%
5th	Remote access searching facilities	14.3%	Access arrangements	12.4%
6th	Web skills workshops	8.7%	Photocopying & fax services	10.9%
7th	Study skills workshops	6.7%	Web skills workshops	5.4%
8th	Extended loans	nil	Study skills workshops	4.7%

Designing DiLIS: A distance learners' information service

Based on the findings of the research, GEL developed a comprehensive Distance Learner's Information Service (DiLIS) which is currently being piloted for 12 months. It is anticipated that DiLIS will address the main issues highlighted by the students surveyed: where to find relevant information to support studies; how to access GEL's on-site resources from a distance; how to order and receive articles quickly; who to contact at GEL for advice about subject – and/or information – related issues.

Between September 1998 and July 1999, DiLIS will offer the following facilities:

- an Internet-based information gateway;
- a postal loan service (restricted to students resident in the UK & Northern Ireland (NI) only);
- a document delivery service (DDS);
- a telephone and email help-line;
- remote literature-searching facilities;
- a mediation service to negotiate access arrangements for alternative academic libraries.

Web based information gateway

The function of the DiLIS web site is to promote the service, to direct students to new electronic information sources and resources that can be used to support their studies, to provide 'net skills' training and to maintain a current awareness service for a wide range of subject related issues. In addition to this, the DiLIS web page has links to relevant web sites that encourage the development of the four main library and information skills:

- retrieving information
- evaluating information
- organising information
- communicating information.

Postal loan service (UK & NI only)

A postal loan service has been introduced that will improve distance learners' access to existing GEL resources. Although it is restricted to

students resident in the UK and Northern Ireland during the pilot period, it is hoped that once the service has been costed it will be extended world wide.

Document delivery service (DDS)

Many academic libraries in the UK that support distance learning programs provide document delivery services. DiLIS provides ELI students with the opportunity to order material held in stock by telephone, fax or post. Although there is no legal requirement to charge for this service under the copyright licence, under the 'Library Regulations' librarians are required to charge for to recovery of photocopy production costs *'together with a contribution towards the general expenses of the library'* (SI 1989, p. 1212).

Unfortunately the request by many of the ELI students that the Library develop a journal repository consisting of donated articles from ex-students and academic staff can not be pursued due to current copyright legislation. The law dictates that:

Copies which may have been obtained by lecturers under the library or inter-library document delivery service, or those which the lecturer makes under 'fair dealing' can not subsequently be donated to the library as they will have been obtained and must be used for the purposes of research or private study. (Norman 1996, p. 22)

In addition to the DiLIS project, the ELI students will also be participating in the Library's trial of EBSCO online, a full text electronic journal service which provides access to an online version of the Library's journal subscriptions. The EBSCO service enables users to access full electronic journals irrespective of their residential location with authorisation being controlled through their IP addresses. If the trial is successful it is hoped that this service will be available to all GEL members within 18 months.

Help-line

A telephone, email help-line and Internet enquiry form is available for students. It is anticipated that the establishment of help-lines in various formats will provide an equitable service for all ELI students irrespective of their residential location. The UK based ELI students who visit the Library on an ad hoc basis will be able to use the help-lines to pre-book heavily used services like the CD-ROM databases and request supervisory support when using them. Pre-booking services and tutorials will enable DiLIS staff to prepare for their visit and ensure that the services and information they require is available, thereby avoiding disappointment.

Remote literature searching facilities

This research has revealed that gaining remote access to literature searching facilities is a major concern for the university's distance learners. Since 14 September 1998 GEL has provided all members of the university with remote access to a selection of electronic literature searching facilities using the authentication service ATHENS. A paper-based service has also been developed to meet the needs of the distance learners (35%) who do not have access to a personal computer or modem. DiLIS staff undertake literature searches requested by distance learners with search results being posted, faxed or emailed directly to the student.

Access arrangements

The results of the distance learners survey reflected many of the findings of previous studies (Stephens 1996; Heery 1996; Unwin 1992; Fisher 1991) in that access to alternative library and information facilities remains a complex issue determined by individual entrance criteria. All the evidence suggests that on a global scale, cooperation seems less likely now due to the impact on resources of competition for students and decreasing funding.

DiLIS providers have followed the example of Sheffield Hallam University by ring-fencing a limited amount of funding to support individual access applications. Recipients of the access support fund are decided between GEL management, DiLIS staff and distance learning course providers. However, to improve library access for non-UK distance learners, it is hoped that during the next 18 months the university will develop links with overseas higher education institutions through a series of 'agents'.

Future developments

Although DiLIS is not a blueprint for library provision for distance learners, it does provide a foundation on which to build a flexible, client-orientated service. There are many aspects of library provision for distance learners that remain unanswered and need to be addressed during the next 12 months. For example, is GEL spending the ELI library budget appropriately given the needs of its students? Instead of increasing the current holdings with multiple copies of books, should the book allocation be split to finance a postal loan service?

It is important to remember that quality information services cost money, and the question is always who will pay. Should the costs be added to the overall course fees or should it be something supported through central

funding, given that the university is keen to develop distance learning projects? It is apparent that ELI students have a right to expect appropriate library and information services to support their studies regardless of their location. Even though GEL has begun to develop a flexible information service, it is clear that if the University of Surrey is going to expand its distance learning programs, links must be forged with like-minded institutions to improve information provision on a global level.

Changing roles

Within these services, we can already see the beginnings of an evolutionary process that will take the library staff into an area that makes them 'information tutors,' complementing the role of the academic tutors. In providing the internet information gateway, the library staff are identifying and communicating sources to students and staff, thus helping in course development. The helplines bring library staff and students into direct contact, where library staff provide not only advice and help, but engage with the students in generating relevant bibliographical and other information sources that support student research. In the traditional role of the library, this activity was primarily seen to be that of the academic tutor. The library staff have also taken on the role in teaching students how to access information through new technologies, or as teachers of 'information literacy'.

It is inevitable that as the service develops and expands, the library will become a stronger and more important player in distance learning provision and support. What will evolve will be a true partnership between the library and the content tutors. The primary beneficiaries will be the students, but course tutors also will benefit in being able to concentrate more on course design and tutoring, whilst library staff will benefit from playing a larger and more integrated role within the institution, as information tutors.

A word of caution

In what has been achieved to date, and what can be achieved in the future, there is one word of caution. Adams (1998) says: 'One concern that I have personally for the future of off campus library services involves the drift towards increasing disparity between the technologically-rich and -poor'. This is a concern that should be born in mind, and has been taken into account in the development of DiLIS. Only half of the ELI distance learning students have access to the internet. Some of those who do not have access live in countries like Saudi Arabia where Web access is forbidden. Others live in countries like the Sudan and Morocco where

there is little or no access to networks. The ELI has taken a conscious decision to continue to recruit from these parts of the world, and therefore has an obligation to continue to provide appropriate support systems. Therefore, DiLIS should continue to run services that can support their resource needs. This is, of course, not to say that technology should not be exploited to the full for those who can use it. Yet, in our drive for technological solutions we should be aware that these innovations may not meet the needs of all distance learners.

Conclusions

The support of distance learning students has brought new challenges to tutors and library staff alike. These challenges are at their greatest in programs like those at the University of Surrey where students are accepted as individuals, wherever they live in the world. Needs will vary from one individual to another. Providing for these needs will require a flexible and constantly changing range of support structures. For a group of students in Japan this may mean a collaborative arrangement with a local university library. For an individual in Switzerland it may mean an ATHENS account and access to on-line journals. For a student in the Sudan it may mean providing articles by post in response to a fax or postal request.

The growth of higher education in the future will undoubtedly be in the area of distance or off-site learning. What is currently termed 'non-traditional' education is likely to become the norm within the first few decades of the next century. If opportunities are going to be extended and distance learning students treated equitably, it is incumbent upon us to change the ways in which we work and look towards the future with vision now, rather than later. The DiLIS initiative is the beginning of that process for the University of Surrey.

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Glen Fulcher is Director, English Language Institute, University of Surrey.
Address: University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 5XH, UK.
<G.Fulcher@surrey.ac.uk>

Debbie Lock is a DiLIS Research Officer. *Address:* George Edwards Library, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 5XH, UK.