New Library Services for Distance and Lifelong Learners at the University of Sunderland, United Kingdom

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As we enter the New Learning Age, librarians face the daunting challenge of creating a high quality learning experience for the growing number of distance and lifelong learners who are physically remote from our campuses. In response to the UK Government’s policy of widening participation in education, numbers of universities are expanding their off-campus provision. The University of Sunderland, in particular, has embarked on a number of unique initiatives to facilitate both distance and community-wide lifelong learning, and we have developed distinctive library and information services to support these new learners.

Services for distance learners

Services for learners who are registered on our distance programmes are increasingly well-used, particularly by our overseas learners who are undertaking project work as part of their studies. Distance learners can register with us directly, via our dedicated Web pages, or through their local learning centre. They can communicate with us by telephone, fax, email or the Web, and we are exploiting a mixture of traditional and electronic means to serve their library and information needs.

A number of our extensive range of electronic databases and retrieval services have been made available on the Web, and we provide enquiry and literature searching services. Documents can be delivered by post or fax, and postal loans are offered in the United Kingdom. Books can be reserved and renewed either directly or through the self-service facilities on our online catalogue. Assistance is given is gaining access to learners’ local libraries. As part of our commitment to quality, distance learners are surveyed annually about their awareness and experience of these services, and they are asked for their recommendations for development.

We have plans to develop these services even further. Publicity and marketing will be improved, working in conjunction with local centres, and interfaces will be customised to particular national requirements. The range of electronic databases increased, user authentication improved, and information skills training offered over the Web. We will define the standards of service our learners can normally expect, and we will monitor usage and customer feedback with a view to making improvements.

All this will be supported with an increased budget and more staff effort and training. ICT offers great potential for developing services for distance learners, but problems of connectivity, content, competencies, cost and copyright remain. The value of traditional approaches should not be overlooked, and we must ensure that services are sensitive to the pedagogic experience and personal pressures of our distance learners.
**Services for lifelong learners**

The library at the University of Sunderland has developed several partnerships with other libraries and organisations to support community-wide lifelong learning in the City.

The Libraries Access Sunderland Scheme (affectionately known as LASH) is a unique example of cross-sectoral library collaboration designed to open up the world of learning to people of all ages our Learning City. Anyone who lives, works or studies in Sunderland may use the twenty-one public libraries, the four learning centres in the City’s Further Education College and the four libraries in the University.

The three partner organisations have collaborated so that lifelong learners can study at any of the 3,000 reader places in the public and academic libraries spread around the City, and they can make free use the collections, ICT and services provided there. They can use the nearest or most convenient library, and this may be particularly attractive to part-time and disadvantaged students. The public are encouraged to use academic libraries and may get their first taste of life on campus. Staff and students of the City College and University have reciprocal access rights, and are reminded of the value of the public library. Sharing resources means that everyone can benefit from the investment in libraries in the City. Libraries are important places to market and publicise learning, and we believe that through our libraries, learners can be encouraged to step the *ladder of learning* and to develop their interests without unnecessary institutional barriers.

Working together, the libraries in the City have achieved much more. As well as a joint staff training scheme, we have shared our online catalogues and we have provided several thousand full-text electronic journals through a unique City-wide licence. The libraries have supported the University for Industry and other learning initiatives, and we have undertaken research projects. Plans include a City-wide document delivery service; a common smart library card; and involving school libraries, electronic village halls and other learning centres in surrounding areas.

The University Library has also developed partnerships with health trusts, the legal profession, schools, the BBC and has “joined-up” with several other organisations in the City and the North East Region of England.

In the University of Sunderland, we have recognised the importance of supporting distance and lifelong learners and we have developed distinctive library and information services for these new learners, exploiting ICT wherever possible. Indeed, libraries can take the lead and demonstrate the way in which off-campus learning can be facilitated, supported and sustained. The network of libraries has a huge role to play in making the *New Learning Age* a reality.