Deakin University Library

Influencing student retention and success
A qualitative assessment of library use by distance education students from low socio-economic backgrounds

Barriers

- Students’ experiences

- Usability issues

- Institutional impacts

- Personal impacts

- Lack of awareness of services

- Low result relevance

- Students’ voices

- Enablers

- Comfort in online environment

- Easy access to resources

- Personal motivation

- Feeling connected to university

- Academic preparedness/ library training

Students’ voices:

- "I needed to show documentation that I got information from a legitimate source, which was the library, I was able to download quite a few journals as e-journals from the library, and use them in my subject." 

- "If I wanted to access something online, unless I’m actually familiar with how to do that, I can waste five hours of my time trying to get somewhere that someone else will take 10 minutes." 

- "I get a certain amount of free internet, but I tend to use that in the first week. There’ve been a lot of times I’ve needed to look stuff up and needed to use the library, but I can’t, because I haven’t had internet access." 

- "Because I’m an off-campus student, I’ll be on DSO or D2L every night. And so I’ll be working from there. So I only ever go to the Library through there." 

Definitions:

- Off-campus: a mode of study wherein students do not attend lectures on the university campus. They study using course materials provided. This mode is a mode of study where students do not attend lectures etc.

Next stages and future practice

- This study has reviewed important barriers and enablers associated with information access which have implications for practice. Two further stages of the project are being undertaken which utilize the survey and literature review findings.

- Stage 2: Library academic partnerships have been developed with a second-year Unit Chair of the Social Work Unit which has many students enrolled off-campus and from low SES backgrounds. We have actively published embedded services to address common barriers and posted targeted communications at retention trigger points, including:
  - Improvised resource options:
    - providing students with library tips for independent searching
    - responding with encouragement to student queries regarding information management, and discovery.
  - Feedback from students is strongly positive. Effectiveness of these initiatives will be evaluated through pre and post interviews with the Unit Chair, the Liaison Librarian and institutional and situational influencers.

- Stage 3: The project will review institutional and situational influencers within the Library’s responsibility and apply good practice lessons learned from core end-study of off-campus students from low SES backgrounds, are strongly represented.

- Furthermore, Library-academic partnerships will be strengthened through the systematic review of course curricular and assessment being developed by Deakin University’s new strategic plan, UME: the Future Agenda 2020.

Research Methodology

- The research methodology is a mixed method approach with a focus on qualitative research. The Stage 1 method included:
  - A comprehensive review of student retention literature and the potential contribution of academic libraries to student retention and success.
  - Identification of survey population: courses with high enrollment of students from low SES backgrounds and units offered off-campus.
  - Development of interview questions to elicit students’ existing experience of these topics.
  - On-site telephone interviews with 26 students who volunteered to participate.
  - Analysis of interview data using NVivo, identifying themes reflecting students’ experience in accessing information and using the library.

- Literature Findings

- Traditional theories of university student retention have failed to recognize the particular needs and concerns of students from low SES backgrounds and off-campus students.
- University libraries provide a supportive environment that may have an important indirect influence on student outcomes, particularly when they are integrated with support mechanisms from other areas of the university.
- Effective support systems feature appropriate timing, student awareness of services, student control over the use of the support, effective and intuitive design, increasing awareness of trigger points, including:
  - Personal impacts: student access to online technologies that enhance learning.
  - Institutional impacts: content and services, enhanced library instruction, improved access, enhanced learning and teaching.
  - Usability issues: low result relevance.

Background

- A Library project team at Deakin University, Australia is undertaking research to assess potential barriers to information access which may impact on students’ retention and progress in undergraduate degrees.
- Funded as part of a new government initiative to increase student diversity and successful participation in Higher Education, this study focuses on students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds studying in off-campus mode (distance education).
- This project aims to identify key barriers experienced by students in accessing information and to develop strategies to reduce any negative effect of these barriers. Importantly, the approach has also evidenced potential enabling factors.
- As part of a multi-stage research project, the qualitative approach taken in this stage complements quantitative studies of library value which have charted academic library amenity, students’ use of library information resources or other variables against scholarly achievement.

Benefits for practice

- A university library faces a substantial challenge in demonstrating to its institution that it makes a unique contribution to retention. Potential means by which libraries can make a contribution include:
  - working in partnership with teachers and students, for example through embedded librarian services that help students to commit to and engage with their academic studies;
  - catering for at-risk groups when conceiving and providing library resources and services;
  - ensuring that the online channels used to provide resources meet the needs of all students;
  - identifying, anticipating and responding to retention trigger points within the library’s control to minimise the likelihood of student departure; and
  - working with university support areas to ensure integrated support to students at risk of non-completion.