



## The Information Seeking Behaviour of Distance Learners: A Case Study of the University of London International Programmes



Sandra Tury, Lyn Robinson, David Bawden\*

Centre for Information Science, City University London, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

An examination of the information behaviour of distance learning students is described, based on a case study of the International Programmes of the University of London. A comprehensive literature analysis, and comparison of relevant information behaviour models were carried out, supported by a survey of student behaviour. Following a pilot study, the main survey gained responses from 649 students, in 81 countries and following diverse study programmes. A variety of inter-related factors were found to influence information behaviour, level and subject of study being most significant. Ease and speed of access, and familiarity of sources were predominant factors. An extension of Wilson's information behaviour model is proposed to cater for the specific features of the distance learning context.

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### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study reported here was to gain an understanding of the information needs and information-seeking behaviour of distance learners, using the students of the International Programmes of the University of London as a case study.

Although much research has examined the information-related behaviour of students (Case, 2012), few studies have focused on distance learners. No previous study has looked at the information-seeking behaviour of a large constituency of distance learners who are distributed across several continents, and who predominantly depend on an online library at their host institution.

This gap in research may have arisen because information provision for distance learning has been considered an adjunct to the dominant provision by libraries to student communities primarily based on campus. The increase in scale and diversity of the student community, the importance of distance learning for access to education, and the economic importance of distance learning to higher education institutions necessitate the consideration of information provision for distance learning students as a subject for research.

The rapid growth of distance learning, and the particular nature of library and information provision to distance learners in such a situation, warrant such a study. In the UK alone, whereas before 1990 only the Open University and the University of London External System offered any form of formal distance learning, by 1998 over half of UK universities offered such provision (Unwin, Stephens, & Bolton, 1997). Enrolment figures for institutions concentrating on

distance learning have demonstrated large worldwide growth in recent years.

London University is one of longest-established of such institutions. Since 1858, students worldwide have been able to gain a University of London award without the requirement to attend a College (Kenyon Jones, 2008). Today the University of London has more than 50,000 students from more than 180 countries registered on its distance learning programmes. These programmes have expanded significantly since the early 1990s, student numbers rising by almost 40%, and the range of programmes offered increasing fivefold (Quality Assurance Agency, 2005). The Quality Assurance Agency (2011) commented that "[this] diverse student body may be considered 'non-traditional' as it includes students in poorer and developing countries, mature learners, those with special needs due to disability, or geographic, economic, environmental, professional and social factors, and those with limited educational opportunities".

The study reported here sought to extend the limited body of knowledge in this area by undertaking an information behaviour study of a large and representative sample of widely dispersed distance learners. The research was further aimed at developing a set of recommendations for effectively supporting the library and information needs of distance learners in the digital age. The research was carried out for a doctoral thesis, in which fuller details of all aspects are given (Tury, 2014).

### OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to meet these general aims of the study, six more specific objectives were identified:

- to identify the information needs of distance learners.
- to establish how the information needs of distance learners are met.

\* Corresponding author at: Centre for Information Science, City University, London Northampton Square London EC1V 0HB United Kingdom.

- to identify the challenges or barriers distance learners face when seeking, accessing, and using information sources and channels during the course of their studies.
- to establish the extent to which the information needs of the distance learners are met by the University of London's current Online Library provision.
- to explore what solutions can be employed to help distance learners overcome barriers to information access and use, and hence improve their learning experience.
- to make recommendations for better meeting the information needs of distance learning students.

These objectives were translated into five research questions:

- What are the information needs of distance learners at the University of London?
- What kind of information sources and information channels are used by distance learners and why are they used?
- What barriers do distance learners encounter when accessing and using Online Library resources?
- To what extent does the Online Library meet distance learners' information needs?
- What practical solutions can be employed to help learners overcome the barriers they face when seeking, accessing and using information sources?

In order to answer these questions, a detailed literature analysis was carried out, to identify all studies addressing specifically the information behaviour of distance learners. The results of this analysis were then combined with a comparison of information behaviour models, to give a conceptual basis for the study. From this, and the research questions, a series of hypotheses were generated, to be tested empirically in the University of London context.

#### LITERATURE ANALYSIS

Relevant literature was identified by searches of Library and Information Science Abstracts, Library and Information Science and Technology Abstracts, and Web of Science, by following references and citations, and by scanning relevant journals and reviews. The intention was to be as comprehensive as possible in identifying items dealing specifically with the information behaviour of distance learners, and to be selective in dealing with the broader context.

#### DISTANCE LEARNERS AND LIBRARY SERVICES

Distance learning offers important overall advantages to learners and to educational institutions. It enables education providers with limited resources to increase their student populations without necessarily investing in physical facilities, and allows learners to access any course, local or remote. However, there are also disadvantages to distance learning in relation to information needs, which need to be taken into account in weighing its value and appropriateness and in assessing possible changes to ameliorate those difficulties. The main problem areas for learners include: lack of time; limited access to crucial support networks such as peers, tutors and librarians; delayed feedback; and technology which can fail, is often expensive to implement and often requires specialized skills to be used effectively. The provision of distance education has significant implications for library services, and there is a growing body of literature on how academic libraries have adapted their services to accommodate distance learners. For reviews and examples of this developing perspective, see, [Lebowitz \(1997\)](#), [Unwin \(1994\)](#); [Unwin et al. 1998](#), [Beagle \(2000\)](#), [Ball \(2003\)](#), [Tang \(2009\)](#), [Rarigh-Hopper \(2010\)](#), [Hensley and Miller \(2010\)](#), [Shell et al. \(2010\)](#), [Lockerby and Stillwell \(2010\)](#), [Herring \(2010\)](#), [Iyer \(2012\)](#) and [Oladokun \(2014\)](#).

Among the particular issues addressed have been: the need to foster the idea of 'library as place' for the distance student who may never visit the physical library ([Coonin, Williams, & Steiner, 2011](#)); document delivery for remote users ([Murphy, Franklin, & Raia, 2007](#); [Renner, Vardaman, & Norton, 2007](#)); the promotion of awareness of services among distant users ([Davis, 2007](#)); an 'outreach librarian' role for such students ([Holloway, 2011](#)); the use of standards to demonstrate quality of library services to distance students ([Lewis, 2011](#)); the need for specific training for library staff supporting distance learners ([Cassner & Adams, 2012](#); [Walsh, 2010](#)); and the skills required of librarians supporting distance learners ([Rebmann, Molitor, & Rainey, 2012](#); [Tang, 2013](#)).

#### INFORMATION BEHAVIOUR OF DISTANCE LEARNERS

The information behaviour of students has been one of the most studied topics within the whole field of information behaviour research, giving much empirical data, and suggesting new models; see, for example, [Case \(2012\)](#), [Catelano \(2013\)](#), [Al-Muomen, Morris, and Maynard \(2012\)](#), [Groce \(2008\)](#) and [Urquhart and Rowley \(2007\)](#).

Relatively little attention has been paid to the behaviour of distance learners specifically, although some authors have commented on the particular issues affecting them. An early example was the study by [Unwin et al. \(1997\)](#), which looked at the library needs and expectations of 1000 UK-based postgraduate distance learners. Later studies have addressed issues such as information literacy and library skills instruction for distance learners ([Kumar & Ochoa, 2012](#); [Nazari, 2011](#); [Shaffer, 2011](#)), the incidence of 'library anxiety' among distance learners ([Block, 2007](#)), and how spatial metaphors affect distance education library services ([Mirtz, 2010](#)).

Of particular relevance to the research reported here, a small number of studies have examined distance learners' information behaviour in the round, and these are reported here.

[Thórsteinsdóttir \(2005\)](#) investigated the information-seeking behaviour of Library Information Science distance learning students and staff members at a Swedish University. Her study revealed that geographical distance had a significant influence on literature acquisition and information-seeking use even in online environments; that distance learners often experienced problems with locating information and mastering the techniques of seeking information, and with use of technology; and there was a link between access to library services and use of high-quality sources.

[Boardi and Letsolo \(2004\)](#) conducted a study on the information needs and information-seeking behaviour of distance learners in Lesotho. The study found that overall most respondents were satisfied with their sources of information, but relied mainly on easily accessible information. In Botswana, the [Oladokun \(2010a,b\)](#) studies found significant evidence that students' information needs were significantly unmet, that printed sources, particularly books, were the most used information source format, that neither level of study nor location had a significant influence on students' preferred information source format and that a significant number of students depended on their lecturers and colleagues to supply information. [Adetimirin and Omogbhe \(2011\)](#) examined the library use and habits of distance learning students in a Nigerian university and found that the majority rarely used a library.

[Van de Vord \(2010\)](#) investigated the factors that increase the likelihood of students evaluating the relevance, currency, reliability, completeness and accuracy of online information. The findings indicated significant positive relationships between media awareness and information literacy, between access and information literacy and information efficacy, and between information efficacy and information literacy.

[Byrne and Bates \(2009\)](#) investigated the information behaviour of distance learning business students in Ireland. The study found that although both print and electronic resources were used by the students there was a general preference for electronic resources. This group of students acquired information through both formal sources (such as

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