

Reference services at the University of Newcastle—a tiered approach

The University of Newcastle Library has responded to a dynamic information environment with the provision of traditional and virtual reference services across three campuses on a 24x7 basis. In 1997, the Library and Information Technology Services (ITS) units were combined to offer a converged service model including the provision of library and IT support services from a single information desk. The service was further streamlined in 2003 with the opening of the Auchmuty Information Common and introduction of a three tier service model. In 2006, the Library and ITS units were diverged; however, the service principles remain the same.



Alison Rigby, Associate Librarian Client Services

The first level of service is generally handled by a student 'Rover' who is on duty whenever the library is open. The student 'Rover' handles basic library and directional enquiries as well as IT related matters associated with printing, laptop connections and use of software applications. Second level support to clients is provided by a School Librarian who assists with general reference enquiries including research for assignments, use of databases, the catalogue, Endnote, as well as basic IT enquiries. Second and third level IT support is provided by the IT Call Centre. The third

level of library support is referral to a Faculty Librarian who provides highly specialised information and research services to support the learning, teaching and research activities of the University's communities.

Although an Information Desk service continues to operate in each of the University's libraries, many of the specialised service points have been rationalised over the last ten years. In 2003, the Law and Biomedical service points were combined to become the BLISS (Biomedical Law Information Support Service) service which is staffed by the same team of librarians to provide specialist support to Biomedical and Law staff and students. When this desk is unattended, students can seek help from the Information Desk in the Auchmuty Information Common.

Another interesting feature of the University of Newcastle Library is the provision of a 24x7 operation at each of the campus locations from February to December. A student 'Rover' is always available to provide assistance around the clock which is greatly appreciated by the clients. The Library has received several testimonials from clients about the outstanding level of service that they have received during the early hours of the morning when a lost assignment has been recovered following a computer problem. A 24-hour SMS service is also available.

A further innovation in the service model is the delivery of an electronic reference service (ASAP) which is available to students located locally as well as across 100 countries throughout the world. This service uses commercially-available software to answer reference questions via email and the web. The service is successfully provided by library staff on three campuses including assistance from the Bibliographic Services Team who also monitor and answer questions.

Approximately 20 professional library staff provide reference and research support to the University Community. There are five Faculty Librarians, 12 School Librarians and three Client Services Librarians. Over 35 student 'Rovers' are rostered to provide the 24x7 support service across three locations.

The Faculty Librarians are supported by a team of professional librarians, including School Librarians at the Callaghan Campus and Client Services Librarians at Ourimbah Campus who also provide services to TAFE staff and students. School and Client Service Librarians are responsible for a particular subject or discipline area and work closely with the Faculty Librarians to prepare and deliver information literacy programs.

The reference service at the University of Newcastle Library will continue to evolve in response to the information needs of its clients, advances in technology and availability of electronic resources. The combination of these elements ensures that their services are available on a 24x7 basis throughout the year.

Alison Rigby
Associate Librarian Client Services
The University of Newcastle
alison.rigby@newcastle.edu.au

Managing online reference enquiries

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is the national university for inland Australia. A multi-campus university and one of the largest Distance Education (DE) providers in Australia, CSU has more than two thirds of its student body studying off-campus. 2007 figures show that of a total of nearly 34 000 students, more than 21 000 (about 63%) were studying by Distance Education mode. This figure includes nearly 5000 international students.

The challenge of designing and delivering an equivalent information service to this diverse range of students—Offshore, DE and Internal—has resulted in a dynamic, client-focused library service.

CSU Library traditionally received reference enquiries from students and staff via a range of means: face-to-face, by telephone, via the Library forum, and by email to generic campus email accounts or to individual staff email accounts.

While the face-to-face, telephone, and forum interaction was not seen to be a problem, CSU Library did have concerns about the disparate nature of the email service, with little consistency in how enquiries were dealt with across the division, no central repository for storing enquiries, no tool in



place to measure the quality of staff responses to queries, and no single means of compiling and recording statistics.

In 2006, CSU Library instituted a new online *Ask a Question* service which sought to address these deficiencies. Using a commercially available reference-management product, the service allows CSU students and staff to submit enquiries and questions to a centralised service point, to track the progress of their enquiry, and to search a database of previous questions and answers.

The service is built around the online *Ask a Question* form which is designed to replicate the reference interview by asking the client details about their subject and level and mode of study, but also, importantly, where they have already looked and how they intend to use the information received. This essential information transforms the online form from a basic help request to a bona fide reference enquiry. The move to the *Ask a Question* form has resulted in consistency in the quality and speed of responses, easy harvesting of statistics on why the reference service is used and who is using it, and the availability of a knowledge base of previous questions and responses.

Enquiries are dealt with by information staff across the campuses within one working day of receipt: it is proposed to extend the service to weekends which will help to address the needs of DE students studying at weekends, and offshore students studying in different time zones.

CSU Library currently receives up to 400 *Ask a Question* enquiries a month, depending on the time of year. Most of these enquiries are submitted by DE students although the service is also used by internal students and staff.

In keeping with its aim of continuous improvement, CSU Library has investigated extending its online information service to include an instant messaging service, and there is a pilot scheduled to begin in January 2009. CSU Library is continually evaluating its reference and information services to ensure quality and equivalence of service delivery to its diverse client base.

Tim Eggleston
Information Services Librarian
Albury-Wodonga Campus Library
Charles Sturt University
teggleston@csu.edu.au

Is the virtual reference interview dead?

Many of the files I was forwarded were not at all useful. Had the librarian paused to ask me a little bit more about my question and what I was looking for, this could have been avoided.¹

So said a library student who reported back on his or her experience of using virtual reference. The authors found that, in their case study, the reference interview online had all but disappeared.

Once the interview was considered a cornerstone of good reference practice. Some practitioners have argued that it is

outdated and irrelevant. Does digital reference change or support either of these perspectives? Did the internet kill or resuscitate the reference interview?

To get a glimpse of current practice, three librarians from Melbourne were interviewed over the telephone between September and October 2008 about their use or non-use of the reference interview when answering questions online. Librarians were interviewed from the public, health and academic sectors.

Here virtual reference is defined as the use of electronic communication between the customer and staff member to find information. Common examples of virtual reference include chat and email. Less common examples include videoconferencing and SMS reference.

Two of the librarians interviewed reported back on their interview practice when using email reference. One librarian reported back on her interview experience with chat reference.

Katie Norton noted that with the email Monash Public Library Ask a Librarian Service, the interview was rarely used. Queries are most often taken at face value, unless the question is convoluted or unclear. If enquiries need clarification, a staff member will ask further questions via email, or however the customer nominated to be contacted.

At Monash, the interview is not often used because the email submission form addresses some of these interview concerns, for example discovering whether the information is needed for business or study. Often too the question is specific to the Monash Public Library such as local history queries, and so a definitive answer is inbuilt.

Staff at the Monash service do not rely on general internet searches to answer questions. More often the patron will be pointed to online databases to support answers. Staff give either an answer or a referral.

Katie Norton recognised that a reference interview is more often given to those patrons who ask for assistance in person. Virtual queries are more often accepted as given.

Elizabeth Deans of the Royal Melbourne Hospital Health Sciences Library reported little need for the reference interview. No overt interview is conducted.

The library has two separate web forms for email reference. One is designed for general reference questions and the other is designed for evidence based queries. Hospital and staff from public mental health services, plus some affiliated students can request database searches. The forms were designed to elicit as much information as possible from the client, so in one sense the well structured web form takes the place of a reference interview. Telephone numbers are always requested from the client to both follow up and clarify if the need arises.

Staff at the hospital library are happy to search on behalf of the client. Staff will also train clients in search strategies and here the interview is loosely incorporated, but training occurs in-person and so therefore is not virtual.