

CONNECTING

ONLINE STUDENTS WITH LOCAL LIBRARIES

The development of an innovative new program for online students, OUA Connect, began as a result of a chance conversation between Cathy Stone, Director of Student Success with Open Universities Australia (OUA), and a proactive librarian, Daniel Kielly, from the NSW Council Region of Shellharbour. Now it has expanded across two states and will be partnering more than 18 councils by early next year.

That initial conversation centred on the fact that OUA students in the Shellharbour region, located on the south coast of NSW, would often attend local libraries to seek resources or simply to find a quiet place to study. As Daniel Kielly explained, if the library staff knew more about Open Universities Australia and the expectations placed on online students, they would be in a much better position to assist them.

From this, an idea was born. Why not approach local libraries to see if they would be interested in learning more about OUA, but more importantly, in offering library information sessions for online students? These sessions could provide the opportunity for students, studying online and largely on their own, to come together, get to know their local library, make use of the resources on offer and gain that important face-to-face contact with others who understand their study needs.

The next step was to approach libraries and establish a pilot program. Daniel Kielly was willing to help coordinate a pilot program at Shellharbour to the south of Sydney, while the newly appointed Partnership Officer for Lifelong Learning at Wyong Council, Debbie Notara, was willing to coordinate the pilot across another two libraries in the Wyong Shire, to the north of Sydney.

The pilot program ran between August 2012 and February 2013. Four local libraries were promoted as places where OUA students could access high speed internet, modern computers, journal databases, interlibrary loans, as well as encouragement and support at an individual level from trained library staff.

The popularity of the library sessions was so great that OUA decided to expand the program, officially creating the OUA Connect Library Program. Student feedback indicated a highly satisfied cohort, willing to recommend the program to others and wanting the program to continue. Primary reasons for attendance were for academic purposes such as accessing computers and receiving assistance from library staff, and for connection with other students, both for study support and social reasons.

Since then, with the help of the State Libraries of NSW and Victoria, interest has grown considerably amongst the library community, not only those states but also in Queensland,

Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. By the end of August, OUA Connect extended its partnerships to more than 18 council libraries across New South Wales and Victoria, and is likely to be working in partner libraries in two other states by February, 2014.

This valuable program has provided an opportunity for OUA to work collaboratively with local libraries to provide a community space in which online students can interact and study with support from library staff.

It has the potential to improve academic success for online students, as well as enhancing student satisfaction, particularly amongst those from rural and remote regions of Australia.

Libraries interested in OUA Connect can benefit from information sessions that inform them about OUA, its patterns of study, the needs of online students and the support services that OUA offers to students (including academic skills assistance). Each library can decide what they are able to offer to students – ranging from a one-off library information session, to weekly drop-in sessions for online students with a dedicated member of the library staff in attendance, to anything in between.

Many libraries already run sessions for their local communities which are of benefit to OUA or online students, including computer and essay writing classes. OUA is happy to promote any such sessions to its students in relevant postcode areas for each library. Promotion is primarily by email and via the OUA website, but there are also regular social media posts through OUA's social media channels.

The program attracts great interest from students on Facebook. In fact, the very first OUA Connect status post was the most popular amongst OUA's Facebook community, with more than 124,000 individual views. Comments posted indicate that this is a very popular concept, with students commenting on which local libraries they would like to see participating in the OUA Connect Library Program.

To learn more about the OUA Connect Library Program or to become part of the network, visit www.open.edu.au/student-admin-and-support/study-resources/oua-connect-library-program/. Partnerships between educational services and local libraries are of benefit to all – to the libraries, to the educational institutions and, most of all, to the students.

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