

Information needs of students



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A study was undertaken to establish the information needs of higher degree by research students studying via distance education mode, and to establish where they get their information from. The study was limited to Australian domiciled Deakin University students doing a PhD, EdD or Masters by research.

Students were asked what services they would expect the library to provide. These were: electronic database searches; loans of books; photocopies of articles; interlibrary loans; reference support, such as subject requests; assistance with dial-in services; post-graduate research contact or liaison librarian; reader education; access to theses; and dial-in access to library catalogues, electronic databases, and the Internet.

Students were also asked what resources, services and facilities they had used from Deakin University Library. It was interesting to see the most used library services corresponded with the responses listed previously, and that the traditional types of services are still the most requested and used. Even so, there was a definite demand for dial-in access to electronic databases, library catalogues and the Internet. In reality, the dial-in services that are already available, do not, at this stage, have the usage expected from the research students.

The figures from this study indicate that approximately eighty-four per cent of the respondents are urban residents. From the data collected, one could surmise that most respondents did not enrol as distance education students due to geographic isolation as a total of seventy-seven per cent of respondents were no more than thirty minutes away from the most convenient library (whether from home or work) that contained information related to their research. Over a quarter of respondents stated they were no more than five minutes away. One could assume the majority of these people were talking about workplace libraries.

The amount of library use was definitely not dependent on whether or not the review of relevant literature was completed. This can be seen as a major factor in the information needs of higher degree by research students, as the need for library access continues throughout the duration of the degree.

Only twenty-six per cent of respondents were given any guidance from their supervisor on how to carry out research as an off-campus student when they began their thesis. They are often left to fend for themselves.

Data was gathered from a number of sources to attempt to establish trends in home-based library usage. According to the questionnaire responses, eighty-four per cent of respondents used Deakin University Library at least once throughout the duration of their research degree. This figure is significantly higher than those from previous studies. According to the Innopac circulation system used by the library, seventy-five per cent of the total sample had actually borrowed at least one item. It was surprising to see that many students had only ever borrowed one or two items. In fact, nearly forty per cent of students who sent questionnaires had borrowed no more than ten items. Such low apparent usage is a concern with students aspiring to a research degree.

A greater number of respondents (over eighty-six per cent) stated they had used libraries other than the home institution library for their thesis research. Other university libraries are used extensively by off-campus research students with seventy-one per cent of respondents having used them. The National or State libraries are the next most used libraries with twenty-six per cent having used them. This is not unusual as these libraries are often the only ones that hold primary resource material needed for original research. Only twenty per cent of respondents made use of public libraries and four per cent used TAFE libraries. The more specialised nature of original research appears to be a reason for the lack of usage of TAFE libraries. Clearly there were two major reasons for using other libraries: convenience, and access to material not held by Deakin. The serendipity of browsing was also an important factor in using other libraries.

Overall, the home institution library is needed, but it is only fair to say that students can, and do, get by without it on many occasions. Their specialised needs should be backed up by services that are different from those provided to undergraduates or post-graduates undertaking coursework study. A specific library contact person or liaison librarian is justified to co-ordinate the disparate needs to ensure the university is supporting these important students. It appears that library staff may have a broader role in assisting students due to a lack of support from supervisors, or in some cases, the supervisor's lack of up to date knowledge in such areas as literature reviews. Librarians should work with academics and students to ensure they obtain the skills required with the technology that is now available to them. ■

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