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.

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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.

Carolyn Boyle of the Melbourne University Library Chat Service stated that the reference interview was often used. She mentioned that in most cases the reference interview was not formal. In particular, it is used at Melbourne University Library when the question is unclear. Staff members extract further information by asking the user questions such as whether the student is interested in a particular collection or subject area.

The type of queries received by the chat service range from the complex to basic IT or difficulties with catalogue search. If, for example, a student finds that an electronic resource is not working, the librarian will ask the user to take him or her through the steps to get to the point where difficulties occurred.

In Carolyn Boyle's experience, the user, especially the first year student, is not frightened away when a reference interview is conducted online. In fact, the user is less likely to be inhibited with the virtual reference interview than with a face-to-face exchange.

All three librarians alluded to or stated that a form of reference interview was often given when the patron asked a question in person. Staff at Melbourne University Library regularly used the interview in virtual reference, but staff at Monash Public Library and the Royal Melbourne Hospital Health Sciences Library seldom did. This is a mere glance at virtual reference interview practice in Melbourne. The interview in digital reference may not be dead, but it may just be endangered.

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1. Nilsen, Kirsti and Ross, Catherine Sheldrick, (2006), "Evaluating virtual reference from the users' perspective," *The Reference Librarian*, 95/96, p. 67.

HSC workshops at Coffs Harbour City library

HSC exams are a serious business. Public libraries try their best to make HSC panic-free for students. The *HSC and Education Forum 2008* and *Reference@Metcalf seminar*, both held at the State Library of NSW, motivated us to prepare workshops for HSC students.

The year advisors of local schools were invited to book one hour workshops for year 11 classes, from 22-26 September 2008. Approximately 60 local students attended the three workshops and others will be attending sessions early next year.

The workshop held at the library included showing features of our library catalogue, databases, HSC related websites, and services that provide online help. The display of items included reference resources, literary works in several formats, study guides and infocus articles.

The databases shown were:
- Britannica Online
- Facts on file - History Online
- Facts on file - Science Online
- Science Reference Centre,

Surinder Kaur and some of the students who attended the HSC workshops

- GreenFile
- Bloom's Literary Reference Online
- Literary Reference Centre,
- Novelist

The websites highlighted were:
- CSU's HSC online
- Inside Break
- Sparknotes
- Infocus
- State Library NSW HSC English
- Legal Information and Access Centre

Online help services promoted were:
- *yourtutor* – service by subscription
- *AskNow* – free virtual library service

The workshop started by brainstorming to help students realise that the pathway to success for the HSC starts with good listening, note making and time management. Study and exams section of CSU's *HSC online* website was promoted to help improve these skills.

We did a live demonstration of *yourtutor*, a commercially-available service that the library subscribes to. Students were also familiarised with *AskNow* service so they had wider access to help, especially during school holidays and within school hours when *yourtutor* is not available.

The highlights of eight online databases were shown. The students appreciated *Britannica online's* web's best sites, articles from journals and magazines and multimedia files. *History online* had primary documents to impress students. *Science online* which includes mathematics also had biographies and a science dictionary.

Three literary databases were relevant for Standard and Advanced English. They provide not only a synopsis, criticism and biography of authors but they also connect works by themes and give information on the genre of writing.

There was so much to cover in one hour. Each database and website was limited to three minutes. To make it more relevant for the students, we chose examples from the HSC syllabus. Showing the features of the library website was important too. Judy Atkinson, the Programs Officer, and I worked together to keep the students focused the whole time.