

# Background

A Library project team at Deakin University, Australia is undertaking research to assess potential barriers to information access which may impact on students' retention and progress in undergraduate degrees.

Funded as part of a new government initiative to increase student diversity and successful participation in Higher Education, this study focuses on students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds studying in off-campus mode (distance education).

This project aims to identify key barriers experienced by students in accessing information and to develop strategies to reduce any negative effect of these barriers. Importantly, the approach has also evidenced potential *enabling* factors

As part of a multi-stage research project, the qualitative approach taken in this stage complements quantitative studies of library value which have charted academic library amenity, students' use of library information resources or other variables against scholarly achievement.

## Research Methodology

The research methodology is a mixed method approach with a focus on qualitative research. The **Stage 1** method included:

- a comprehensive review of student retention literature and the potential contribution of academic libraries to student retention and success
- development of interview questions to elicit students' existing experience of the topic
- identification of survey population: courses with high enrolment of students from low SES backgrounds and with units offered off-campus
- in depth telephone interviews with 26 students who volunteered to participate
- analysis of interview data using NVivo, identifying key themes reflecting students' experience in accessing information and using the library.

## Literature Findings

- Traditional theories of university student retention have failed to recognise the particular needs and concerns of students from low SES backgrounds and off campus students.
- University libraries provide a supportive environment that may have an important indirect influence on student outcomes particularly where they are integrated with support mechanisms from other areas of the university.
- Effective support systems feature: appropriate timing, student awareness of services, student control in using the support, effective and intuitive technologies providing access to resources, and awareness of trigger points impacting on student progress and adapting services to meet these.

### Personal impacts

family background, educational aspirations, confidence, motivation to study

### Situational impacts

financial status, work-life balance, isolation, access to resources

### Institutional impacts

institutional culture, teaching standards and methods, subjects taught, library and other facilities, social support

## Definitions

In Australia **off-campus** is a mode of study where students do not attend lectures etc on the university campus. They study using course materials provided. This mode is also called distance learning or distance education.

Students from a **low socio-economic status (SES) background** are identified by their home address—located in areas grouped in the lowest quartile of the SEIFA Education and Occupation Index produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. <http://tinyurl.com/3uy5vo>

# Deakin University Library

## Influencing student retention and success

A qualitative assessment of library use by distance education students from low socio-economic backgrounds



# Benefits for practice

A university library faces a substantial challenge in demonstrating to its institution that it makes a unique contribution to retention. Potential means by which libraries can make a contribution include:

- working in partnership with teachers and students, for example through embedded librarian services that help students to commit to and engage with their academic studies;
- catering for at risk groups when conceiving and providing library resources and services;
- ensuring that the online channels used to provide resources meet the needs of all students;
- identifying, anticipating and responding to retention trigger points within the library's control to minimise the likelihood of student departure; and
- working with university support areas to ensure integrated support to students at risk of non-completion.

Source: Hagel Pauline, Horn Anne, Owen Sue, Currie Michael, (2012 in press) 'How can we help?' The contribution of university libraries to student retention. Australian Academic and Research Libraries, Sep2012, Vol. 43 Issue 3.

## Next stages and future practice

This study has revealed important barriers and enablers associated with information access which have implications for practice. Two further stages of the project are being undertaken which utilise the survey and literature review findings.

**Stage 2:** Library-academic partnerships have been developed with a second year Unit Chair in the Social Work unit which has many students enrolled off campus and from low SES backgrounds. We have actively initiated embedded services to address common barriers and posted targeted communications at retention trigger points, including:

- showcasing useful information resources
- providing students with timely tips for independent searching
- responding with encouragement to student queries regarding information management and discovery.

Feedback from students is strongly positive. Effectiveness of these initiatives will be evaluated through pre and post interviews with the Unit Chair, the Liaison Librarian and through student online surveys.

**Stage 3:** The project will review institutional and situational influencers within the Library's responsibility and apply good practice learned from within core units of study where off-campus students from low SES backgrounds are strongly represented.

Furthermore, Library-academic partnerships will be strengthened through the systematic review of course curriculum and assessment being directed by Deakin University's new strategic plan, LIVE the Future: Agenda 2020.

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