

Treading in uncharted water: an experience of the Open University of Hong Kong Library

Purpose

This paper aims to report how and what the Open University of Hong Kong Library has embarked on serving the increasing number of the full-time face-to-face students who are blatantly different from the distance learning students in profile and study mode.

Design//Methodology/Approach

The paper examines the changes in student population of the University, and then the profile, the learning mode and needs of the new group --- full-time face-to-face learning students. The Library's initiatives to meet the needs of this group are described. Further moves are proposed and explained.

Findings

A library must proactively meet the challenges. This demands strategic thinking and action by Library at all levels at all times.

Originality/Value of a Paper

The paper shows that an academic library disregarding its constraints in manpower and finance can and should make a positive and active role in student learning. Academic libraries are challenged in similar ways. It is only whether and how well a library reacts determines the library is "big" or "small".

Paper Type

Case study

Keywords

The Open University of Hong Kong
Library support
Distance learners
Net Generation
Academic libraries

Autobiographical Note

Edith WU, Senior Assistant Librarian, can be contacted at ewu@ouhk.edu.hk or Library, The Open University of Hong Kong, 30 Good Shepherd Street, Homantin, Kowloon, Hong Kong.

Prologue

In a chat over lunch with a new senior academic staff member, he shared his passion for library work. His would have been on a different career path if a job offer had not come when he was taking his information science courses. We talked about Internet, plagiarism, students' awareness of copyright, etc. A pleasant surprise was that he thought students should learn the library classification scheme, which would help build up their ability to organize their work. If more senior academic staff members understand or better yet, appreciate, library work, our battle is half-won.

The Open University of Hong Kong

Overview

In 1989, the Hong Kong Government established the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong and subvented the Institute's recurrent operation for four years. The Institute was re-titled officially as the Open University of Hong Kong in 1997. By then, the University is on both self-financing and self-accrediting status. Its four Schools, namely, School of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Business and Administration, School of Education and Languages, and School of Science and Technology, offer programmes and courses from sub-degree to postgraduate levels.

The programmes are delivered mainly by distance learning. The University has extended to full-time face-to-face learning. In 2003, the first full-time undergraduate programme was launched.

Currently, there are 17,276 (9,364 in term of full-time equivalent) students. Of them, 15,075 (87.26%) are distance learning students whereas 2,201 (12.74%) full-time face-to-face students (The Open University of Hong Kong, 2006).

Distance learning students

Distance learning students are found at all levels of the 154 programmes and 395 courses (The Open University of Hong Kong, 2006). Except for the postgraduate and the professional ones, programmes and courses are open to Hong Kong residents over the age of 17. Students must fulfill a required total number of credits to earn the qualification. A five-credit course lasts for one semester (about 6 months) whereas a ten- and a twenty-credit one for two semesters (about 12 months). Semesters begin in April and October. Students are free to choose courses, pace and exit points of study.

Students receive not only structured learning materials including written text, assignment questions and supplementary reading in package, they can also utilize the online learning module of the courses to access course materials, to read course news and schedule, interact with their fellow students, tutors and course co-ordinators, and to submit assignments. Scheduled tutorials and class sessions are held regularly in weekday evenings and weekends on Campus and other locations.

According to the latest student statistics, 42.7% of the distance learning students are in the age from 26 to 35, 32.6% from 36 to 45, and 11.7% over 45 (The Open University of Hong Kong, 2006).

Full-time face-to-face learning students

The University now offers only undergraduate programmes for full-time face-to-face students. A bachelor's degree with honours requires four years of study. Students, depending on their academic qualifications, can be admitted to year one, three or four. An academic year comprising of two semesters runs from September to May in the following year.

Unlike their distance learning counterpart, full-time students are not given study packages in print. The online learning module enriches their face-to-face learning.

69.9% of the students are below the age of 22 (The Open University of Hong Kong, 2006). These students are born between 1982 and 1991. This group, labeled as Generation-D, digital natives, Millennials, or the Net Generation (Shih and Allen, 2006), has distinct characteristics (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005).

1. More Campus time.

Obviously, full-time students have less outside-school commitments and they should have more time on Campus. On the contrary, 97% of our distance learning students are working adults and they are more “off-Campus” directed (The Open University of Hong Kong, 2006).

2. More digitally competent.

According to a 2006 survey, 71.7% of households in Hong Kong had PCs. Of them, 93.6% of the PCs (excluding palm top and Personal Data Assistant) were connected to Internet. Alternatively, 67.1% of all households had their PCs (excluding palm top and Personal Data Assistant) connected to Internet (Census and Statistics Department, 2006a). In the business sector, another survey in 2006 on business sector finds that about 61% of all establishments used PCs. 92% of these establishments or 56% of all establishments had Internet connection (Census and Statistics Department, 2006b). The penetration of PC and Internet at work and home in Hong Kong is not shallow. It can be assumed that many of distance learning students are computer literate although the level of skill varies much. Young students intuitively use information technology tools in their daily lives.

3. Team-oriented.

The Net Generation often prefers to learn and work in teams. They find “peers more credible than teachers when it comes to determining what is worth paying attention to” (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005). On the other hand, distance learning students tend to work more on individual basis.

4. Fast, interactive and experiential.

The Net Gen expects immediate response and likes to try. Interactivity, fast pace and engagement are what they look for.

The Library

Services

“Effective and appropriate services for distance learning communities may differ from, but must be equivalent to, those services offered on a traditional campus” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2004). To facilitate distance learning students, the Library has been keen on developing electronic services and resources so that the students can have a library at fingertips anytime and anywhere. The “Electronic Library” is the gateway for students to find Library holdings and read the 16,000 plus full-text electronic journals and databases as well as a similar number of electronic books, to request document delivery and interlibrary loans, to get assistance from Library staff, and to look up subject pathfinders and tailor-made database guides.

The “physical library” occupies a total area of 2,121 square metre since the University moved to the present Campus in 1996. Its full-fledged services are available all-year-round for the convenience of students. They can borrow books, browse the print collection of 120,000 books and over 1,000 journals, consult Library staff in person, search Internet through both wired and wireless networks and find a place to study.

A team of 26 Library professionals and support staff have been endeavoring to fulfill the Library mission to provide “quality information services and a convenient environment for information access to both students and staff, with a view to supporting the development of distance learning, teaching and research activities” (The Open University of Hong Kong Library, n.d.)

Challenges

The number of full-time students leaped from 521 to 1,342 in 2005 and then 2,201 in 2006 (The Open University of Hong Kong, 2004, 2005, 2006). Within a short period, the Library is interfacing with over 2,000 users who are remarkably different from our “traditional” clientele in age, learning style and disposition. Neither are these new users of particular high regard of libraries.

In the absence of local surveys on college students’ use of libraries in Hong Kong, the OCLC report “Perception of Libraries and Information Resources” in 2005 sheds lights

and should have certain relevance in the local context (De Rosa, 2005). It finds that email and search engines are the two most frequently-used electronic information resources. Logically, college students are most familiar with these. When they search information, they begin with search engines. They learn about new information sources mostly from friends if search engines are excluded as a referral tool. They do agree that the information provided by libraries is worthwhile and satisfactory. Whether they choose libraries as the first place to go is another matter.

How does the Library befriend this young group?

Initiatives by the Library

Henry Adams says “Chaos often breeds life, when order breeds habits.” (Adams, n.d.) The Library has geared efforts in the past 18 months to respond.

New forms of information literacy programmes

The Library conducts two rounds of Workshops each semester for distance learning students. Opening to both new and continuing students, the Workshops are held on weekday evenings and weekend afternoons to suit their time. Students’ overloaded schedule and the packed curricula make it mostly not feasible to arrange workshops during their tutorial time or on subject basis. Workshops for postgraduate programmes and project-based courses are the only exceptions.

The content of Workshops is customized for these “back to school” students to ensure that, after the session, 1) they know where and how to find and use Library resources, and 2) they can search confidently. We decided to start with the examples from course material packages. They are taught how to read citations, and then where to find what information types in the Electronic Library. These are followed by hands-on exercises to navigate a few electronic resources in the Electronic Library to help them feel at ease with new interfaces. This is important because even students who are computer literate will be dazzled by the array of electronic journal, database and book providers. The students are generally able to follow through and thus gain confidence. Workshops bridge the Library resources with the course materials, on which students rely heavily for assignments (and their grades!).

The Library Workshops for full-time face-to-face students adopt a different approach to take advantages of the programme structure. In collaboration with Schools, the Workshops are organized by subject majors such as “accounting” and by level of study, if possible. The Workshops are held during class time as part of course so the students must attend. This arrangement allows us to select resources, search examples and hands-on exercises that are more pertinent to their studies in the Workshop. The year one students receive information at introductory level. In a Workshop for the years three and four students of the School of Business And Administration School, they were “rejoiced” when they found company information and reports easily retrievable in Factiva.

A new component was added in September/October 2006. The students could take a simple quiz after the Workshop. They would be given a souvenir if their got five correct answers out of eight. They were lured to visit the Library because they had to return the quiz to Library for marking. We took the chance to solicit their feedback about the Workshops, explain them the right answers, and, most important of all, welcome them to come back for assistance.

InfoSkills Workshops is another venture. Face-to-face students are our principal target audience. The Workshops were meant to be launched in November 2006, when many of them would have their assignments due, to offer prompt and friendly assistance in the time of need. The Series One briefed them how to approach various aspects of a topic, formulate search steps, and locate resources in Library. Each session was designed to be short (around 45 minutes during lunch time on a few weekdays), semi-formal and interactive. The trainer librarian could take students' questions on the spot as discussion topics wherever appropriate. In one session, when some students said that they usually used Google and Yahoo to look for information, the trainer librarian grasped time to talk about how to evaluate the Internet information. It was spontaneous and versatile. At the time of writing of this paper, the Series Two is being planned to cover information use such as plagiarism, citations, copyright.

Presentation slides and the handouts are posted online to benefit both full-time and distance learning students. We are building up the materials and gaining experience through our work for the full-time students. The outcome will be inspiring for an all-round information literacy programme in a near future,

More opportunities for collaboration with Schools

One Library professional librarian is designated as Subject Specialist to each School. Correspondingly, each School assigns one academic staff member as the Library Liaison Officer, who is also the School representative for the Library User Committee. The Library Liaison Officer is therefore instrumental in making the Library-School co-operation a success and in projecting the Library image in the School.

The flux of full-time face-to-face students has brought Library a new platform for working together with Schools. Expecting substantial numbers of year 3 and 4 students for the academic year 2006/2007, the Library saw the need to do refresher Workshops for students of the senior years. The School of Business And Administration was contacted first because the School would have the highest intake of the full-time students. In addition, the School was conscientious of students' need of information skills and had been on a good working relationship with Library in arranging Workshops. The School strongly supported our idea. The Library further suggested that the Workshops should be more focused if the participants could be grouped by their subject major. The School promised without hesitation to slot Workshops in class time, to do the groupings, to notify the students and to book the venues for concurrent sessions. Without the School's

assistance, the 24 Workshops for almost 600 students could not have been held smoothly in September and October 2006. We were glad that we had asked.

Teaching staff is always occupied with academic and administrative work in Summer. We do not take it for granted that "Library Workshops" must be on top of their agenda. We put forth our willingness to hold Workshops to their students at a convenient time and in a suitable format. We discuss with them about the Workshop format and content. They should know the resources their students need most. Responses and support to us are growing.

We have made one more step to strengthen our ties with Schools in learning support, to earn trust from teaching staff, and to showcase our quality work.

New engagement of students in learning support

Do we know our students and do our students know us? Surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc. are the usual tools for libraries to understand user needs and gauge user feedback. These are formal and more or less one-way communication. If two sides know each other more, we will gain good rapport with students. This motivates the Library to pilot a Library Ambassador scheme in April 2006. This is possible and effective especially for the full-time students who are with the University for a continuous period.

An advertisement was emailed to all students and was posted on Campus to recruit students who could do volunteer work in Library for 20 hours from April to June 2006. Upon completion of the service, they would be awarded a certificate of appreciation.

We received an overwhelming response --- 27 from full-time students (from Years One to Four) and three from distance learning students. We met with the applicants in small groups to understand their experience, expectations and reasons for joining. Quite a number of them had library experience when they were in secondary schools. Some took this as a chance to deliver social service or to contribute to the University. Their enthusiasm and expressiveness were impressive. Five full-time students were selected.

In the planning stage, it was laid down clearly that the Ambassadors should not be treated as voluntary helpers doing only shelving, shelf-reading. This would be AN experience for students. They would take part in various routines and user support to take a glimpse of Library operation and services. Comments by the five Ambassadors were encouraging. They had fun in scouring and checking the citations in course materials, and learnt more using electronic resources in the exercise. Patrolling and assisting other users were rated "interesting". In our mingling with them, they knew Library staff was friendly and approachable.

This is the Library's first attempt to involve students and to let students discover us at work. Certainly, it is good that the Ambassadors carry a positive message for Library

among their classmates. “Words by mouth” is always the best promotion. We will be running the second round of Student Ambassadors scheme in Spring/Summer 2007. More contact points are there to connect us with students.

Enhanced promotion of Library resources

Electronic resources (journals, databases and books) have been consuming a considerable proportion of library materials budget. The money is well-spent only if the resources can be utilized to the full potential. This requires promotion, promotion and promotion.

Library Service Update, a quarterly electronic newsletter, was first issued in August 2002. It is emailed to all academic and administrative staff, all tutors and all students. To make the online reading gratifying, the Newsletter is kept succinct and in a pleasing HTML format. Service Alerts, Featured Resources and Resource Updates are the three key columns. In 2006, the Featured Resources was revamped to introduce resources pertaining to a subject discipline rather than individual resources. For each subject, databases, journals, Library of Congress Subject Headings and class numbers of a subject are regularly included. Databases are annotated and their niche content is highlighted. Subject headings and class numbers remain useful when searching the Library Catalogue and browsing shelves. There may be special resources too. The recent issue on the subject “accounting” highlights, among databases and journals, the complete sets of professional examination papers of various accounting associations in the Reference Collection. Students should get a good overview to thrive. .

A new column “Hot Topic” beginning in the January 2007 issue enhances general interests in the Library resources. The Library does provide information beyond academic use. Internet outage inflicting many Asian areas in late December 2006 is the first topic. The few lines tell which Library resources contain information on economical, social and technical aspects of the incident and of Internet.

We have been employing online channels including the Electronic Library, the University’s Students / Staff / Tutor Portals, MyOUHK, and direct email to get Library’s message across. Online channels are emphasized because these are considered effective means to reach the distance learners. The hordes of full-time students made us rethink.

Not much attention to the display boards in the Library was paid. With students who are more visually literate and who tend to spend more time in Library, the displays have to look young and eye-catching. Two display panels are set aside to promoting the databases that the current issue of Library Services Update promotes. Steps to locate these databases, their major screens, and their unique content are presented in graphics. Text is kept to minimum. We improvise the displays with in-house internal talent and handy materials. In spite of the lack of professionally-designed posters, the displays do create an impact. Some told us that they knew more about the database content from the displays. More users stopped by to read the display or pick up resource guides. More enquiries were received.

New staff service skills

Library staff, be professionals and non-professionals, are accustomed to serving distance learning students. User behavior and usage pattern have been known to staff for a long time. These students are generally outspoken and demanding. They require immediate answers and solutions because time is precious to them. The peak hours are afternoons, evenings, weekends and public holidays. Users at the premise need a quiet place to study. A number of them are not adept at using photocopiers, printers or computers in Library because they are not frequent users. They try to learn but easily forget the steps. Staff assistance in service (e.g. how many reserve books they can check out), resources (e.g. how the resource can be located and used), and facilities is crucial. But, this is not a complete knowledge about the users any more.

The newcomers are young and may be a bit restless. They swamp the Library mostly on weekdays from mornings to evenings, and come in groups especially during class breaks. They have few problems with the computers and other equipment once taught. Circulation Counter and Information Desk activities in late mornings and afternoons are on the rise. Staff members are called in more frequently to back up the Counter work. They are busy in reminding these students to keep quiet and not to use mobile phones in the Library. Operation staff is frustrated because that they are caught between the full-time students who are the noise makers and the distance learning students who have a high standard of quietness. Staff has to understand and accept the different learning behaviour of the two groups. We cannot reverse either of them. We can arbitrate and optimize. In communicating with the full-time students, staff explains but must not instruct. When we ask them to keep voices low in the photocopying corner, we also tell them that the structural design of the building does not allow noise reduction devices and so we need their co-operation. If several of them get excited in front of a Library Catalogue workstation, we step forward and ask if they have problems with the Online Catalogue. It is not infrequent that they do really need our help.

Supervisors have to do the reality check of people (users and staff) and environment (trends, physical and virtual assets). We realize the limits and thus have a good guess of how further we can stride at the present stage. We are more certain of our action and direction. On the other hand, we have to be frank with the inadequacies and pull our heads together to hammer out solutions. Some may be only on the wish list for the time being. We should not be caught off guard when opportunities suddenly rise.

Being observant, alert, proactive and service-oriented are some of the usual traits that are required of Library staff. These continue to be. Abilities to learn and adapt are essential.

Reflections

The Library has been fairly successful in the new adventure. The exploration awakens us that we have to be in full gear on the trip down the road.

1. Get connected in the enterprise of the University. A library can no longer exist on its own and proclaims itself as “the heart of campus”. Library staff must be active in formal and informal venues to understand and participate in Campus strategic plans. Some do not look library-related at the very beginning just because other decision makers are not aware what the library can contribute. If we sit and wait, we will be forgotten very soon.
2. Show our determination, capabilities and efforts to collaborate with academic staff and other learning support agencies. Library is a partner in learning support. Library should initiate actions to lead others to believe in our knowledge and our expertise. Resource constraints must not deter us from identifying and prioritizing our action plans.
3. Know and reach out our users. Read blogs, review literature, conduct surveys and focus groups, and walk out of our office to talk to users. It is only whether we dare to move out of the comfort zone and to face the truth, which may be harsh sometimes. Be ready to spot policy, opportunity and technology disconnects. (McDonald, 2006)
4. Articulate and strategize our vision, value and long-term plans, and advance it to the whole Campus. Keep them in pace with those of the University. Explain them well to all levels of the University staff.
5. Enhance faculty and student experience in the Library. Anticipate and respond positively to users’ expectations and needs. Take small solutions if we are limited in resources.
6. Advocate information literacy. Library is in the best position to raise the awareness of the academic staff and of the directorate, and to call for a unified action and strategic plan. Do not wait to be asked. Perhaps some assume that the Library is able to do it alone, or some think that they have been doing it good enough.
7. Face the need of assessment. User surveys are not sufficient to prove the Library’s significance and value. Users are satisfied with our services but this does not imply that the Library is indispensable in their learning life. Stringent evidence-based outcome assessment is the bullet we have to bite.
8. Nurture Library professionals to perform in broad perspectives and with acute awareness, to develop their ability to work effectively across institutional units, and to encourage them to make differences in a change-resistant environment.

Conclusion

The intake of full-time face-to-face students brings in a new window of opportunities for the Open University of Hong Kong Library. We cannot be bound by traditions or the established practice. We must turn to be a learning organization --- facing the external changes positively and effecting internal changes proactively. Continuing and expanding the role of libraries in learning is the one and only one way to ensure libraries' survival and success.

“Libraries could someday find themselves in the same situation as daily train commuters. Just because the train schedule remains the same for thirty years doesn't mean that hapless commuters might not one day find themselves standing on the wrong platform, waiting for the wrong train, unaware that there was a schedule shift in their world order.” (Gandel, 2005)

Academic libraries of all sizes are facing up challenges. It is only whether a library reacts swiftly and responsibly in its context determines the library is “big” or “small”.

References

- Adams, H. (n.d) The education of Henry Adams.
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/hadams/eha19.html>. (Access on February 3, 2007).
- Association of College and Research Libraries (2004). *Guidelines for distance learning library services*.
<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/guidelinesdistancelearning.htm> (accessed on February 3, 2007)
- Census and Statistics Department (2006a). Thematic household survey no. 27: information technology usage and penetration. Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong.
- Census and Statistics Department (2006b). Report on 2006 annual survey on information technology usage and penetration in the business sector. Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong.
- De Rosa, C., et. al. (2005). *Perception of libraries and information resources: a report to OCLC membership*. OCLC, Dublin, OH.
- Gandel, P.B. (2005) “Libraries: standing at the wrong platform, waiting for the wrong train?”, *Educause Review*, vol. 40, November/December, pp.10-11.

McDonald, R.H. and Thomas, C. (2006). "Disconnects between library culture and millennial generation values", *Educause Quarterly*, vol.29, no. 4, pp.4-6.

Oblinger, D.G and Oblinger, J.L. (2005), *Educating the Net Generation*. Educause, Boulder, CO.

Shih, W. and Allen, M. (2006), "Working with Generation-D: adopting and adapting to cultural learning and change", *Library Management*, vol.28, nos. 1 / 2, pp. 89-100.

The Open University of Hong Kong (2004). *Facts & Figures 2004/05*. The Open University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

The Open University of Hong Kong (2005). *Facts & Figures 2005/06*. The Open University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

The Open University of Hong Kong (2006). *Facts & Figures 2006/07*. The Open University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

The Open University of Hong Kong Library (n.d.) Library mission.
http://www.lib.ouhk.edu.hk/frame_7.html (accessed on February 5, 2007)