

Share and share a-like

Philip Payne & Adam Edwards

Nearly 90 higher education libraries in the UK are participating in a reciprocal access and borrowing scheme which will benefit lifelong learners. UK Libraries Plus enables part-time, distance, and placement students to borrow from other libraries close to where they live or work. It also offers staff and full-time students access to each other's libraries for reference.

It is just over a year ago since a meeting of representatives from 19 libraries in membership of the Coalition of Modern Universities (CMU) took place at the University of Derby. The meeting was convened within the context of the increasing challenge posed in providing adequate support for off-campus learners. In particular, all of our libraries were grappling with the issue of supporting distance learners. How do we help students on courses, that do not require regular attendance at the University, gain access to the information resources that they need for their studies?

Views were expressed at the meeting about the type of access which should be provided, who would be covered by any co-operative venture, and what sort of facilities would be made available. Not surprisingly, concerns were expressed about being overwhelmed by students from other institutions. However, the lesson from the successful schemes already operating in London and the South East (London Plus) and in Yorkshire was that the take-up of such schemes was not great but they were valued by the students who used them. The meeting took the courageous step of establishing a Steering Group to set up a pilot scheme for the next academic session. By working together collaboratively, we could put in place a scheme which would benefit all of our students.

The Steering Group immediately set to work on establishing a pilot scheme. It agreed at an early stage that we would work closely with, and build upon, the successful London Plus scheme. This scheme was already well established and it was important to avoid duplication in view of the overlap in membership. It was also possible to draw upon an established set of procedures and a proven way of operating.

London Plus was established in June 1983, through an initiative of the Inner London Polytechnic Libraries (INPOL), to promote resource sharing between the seven polytechnics in London. The primary objective was borrowing by part-time students. It expanded to Kingston and Hatfield Polytechnics in 1988, through an initiative of Lynn Quinney, the then Deputy Librarian of Middlesex University, and was re-badged as London Plus. 'Plus' variously stood for 'Polytechnic Loan Scheme' or 'Part-time Loan Scheme'. Notes from October 1988 show the operating procedures to be largely the same as those bequeathed to UK Libraries Plus. Lynn speculated prophetically on expansion within the London commuting area and that "...eventually the scheme could be extended to all students and staff with truly reciprocal borrowing nationwide."

The vision of a national reciprocal access and borrowing scheme was realised in September 1999. Covering distance and placement students, in addition to part timers, the scheme was initiated with all of the London Plus members plus the all of the CMU institutions, a total of about 40 institutions altogether. By the date of the launch, however, the number of participating institutions had risen to nearly 60. Growth has continued throughout the year and current membership stands at 87 institutions or nearly half of all UK HE institutions. This means that 47 % of part-time students in the UK are now eligible to make use of UK Libraries Plus (62% if the Open University is not counted). The scheme also offers reference access to 57% of UK full-time students and, also, staff of participating institutions.

How does the scheme work? Borrowing users of the scheme apply to their home library for up to three UK Libraries Plus vouchers in person or by post or by printing out from the website. The vouchers can then be exchanged for a borrower's card from participating libraries. As the home library is ultimately responsible for any losses caused by their students, vouchers will only be issued to students who are registered with, and 'in good standing' with their home library. Reference users are given a simple pink voucher, for use with their home student/identity card, to enable access to other member libraries.

Day-to-day co-ordination of UK Libraries Plus is handled by the Convenor, Adam Edwards, while policy issues are handled by the Steering Group, chaired by Philip Payne. In addition, each participating institution appoints a representative who acts as the contact point for other libraries and for the Convenor. Active participation by nominated representatives is encouraged. The first annual conference of representatives took place at London Guildhall University in June but most of the routine issues are handled through discussion via a Mailbase electronic mailing list for representatives (For information on Mailbase see www.mailbase.ac.uk). Individual representatives have taken on responsibilities that are essential for the effective working of the scheme: stationery, publicity, statistics, web site, and conference organisation. The Steering Group primarily operates through its own electronic mailing list with only occasional meetings. It was through a close synergy between the work of the UK Libraries Plus Convenor, members of the Steering Group, and the representatives - and the ability to utilise electronic methods of communication - that the scheme was up and running within just three months.

The scheme is based upon a set of Operating Principles to which all new applicants are required to sign up. Full details of the Operating Principles are available on the web site for UK Libraries Plus (www.lisa.sbu.ac.uk/uklibrariesplus). These represent a marriage of the original principles agreed at the Derby meeting with the operating framework based upon London Plus. The underlying ethos is reflected in two core principles. First, the scheme is for the mutual benefit of member institutions. There should be no net losers and no net gainers. If there is an imbalance, there is an agreement in principle to transfer funding. Secondly, the home institution is responsible for their own students. In other words, although UK Libraries Plus can assist in meeting the information needs of off-campus students, the responsibility for ensuring that students receive adequate learning support rests with the institution which is offering the course. This means that member institutions are expected to ensure that their students are adequately trained or supported in using other libraries' resources. There are also obligations on the home institution if their students incur debts or charges at another library.

The Steering Group has recently agreed that the scheme will continue next year. The next year will be a period of consolidation within existing operating principles. During this time, the Steering Group will be drawing up a constitution for UK Libraries Plus and there will be elections to the Steering Group in June 2001. It is envisaged that the scheme will continue in much the same format thereafter.

Why do we feel that the scheme has been successful? The results speak for themselves. In the period between the launch and March 2000, users of the scheme had taken 2486 cards to enable them to borrow from another library. A total of 1284 of these have been redeemed. No major operating problems have been experienced. Students from other institutions have not overwhelmed participating libraries. The greatest imbalance has occurred at Kingston University with a net increase of 180 additional users from other institutions. However, this only represents an additional 1.24% more part-time students for the library to deal with.

An evaluation of UK Libraries Plus has been undertaken by the SCONUL (Standing Conference of National and University Libraries) Task Force on Distance Learning. This consists of a questionnaire survey aimed at finding out what users think about the scheme. The questionnaire has been sent to all 1284 registered users. Initial feedback from the survey shows the users to be mostly mature students in their 30s and 40s, for whom access to books and journals close to home is vital. Indeed over half the respondents (129/242 or 53%) who have returned forms so far rate the scheme as vital to their studies. This is born out by the following comments:

"I am very grateful to the scheme as I do not live anywhere near my home library and the county libraries only have a limited amount of books in specific areas. Gaining access to a university library has been a great help to my studies, thanks."

[BA Early Childhood student at North London, living in Pulborough West Sussex, using Brighton]

"... UK Libraries Plus came as a real boost and should benefit other distance learning students..."

[MSc Facilities Management at Leeds Metropolitan using York]

"Excellent. I would not have been able to accept the course if it were not for the scheme."

[Cert HE Counter Fraud, Portsmouth student using Oxford Brookes]

"Good scheme easy to use. People at home library and at Keele very helpful and co-operative - made it a pleasure and felt a member of both institutions"

[MBA student, registered at Lincolnshire and Humberside, using Keele]

The initiative which librarians are taking through UK Libraries Plus is clearly being recognised and appreciated by lifelong learners. There is also some early evidence that the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is recognising the contribution that UK Libraries Plus can make to the quality of the students' learning experience. A recent QAA assessment of pharmacology and pharmacy at the University of Derby makes specific reference to UK Libraries Plus. It is felt by the assessors that the wide range of information sources available to these part-time, distance learning programmes contributes to "... the development of students' transferable skills and preparation for lifelong professional development."

UK Libraries Plus demonstrates a commitment by UK higher education libraries to work together to support lifelong learning. Its emphasis upon providing library access for part-time, distance, and placement students recognises that convenient access to a library is crucial to people who are having to carefully integrate their studying with busy working lives and home responsibilities.

Membership of UK Libraries Plus is open to the library of any higher education institution whose main funding is from one of the UK HE funding councils. It is hoped that other institutions will wish to join this successful scheme for the Autumn. If your library wishes to join, please contact Adam Edwards (a.edwards@cssd.ac.uk).

UK Libraries Plus Steering Group

Philip Payne (Leeds Metropolitan University) - Chair
Claire Abson (Sheffield Hallam University)
Gordon Brewer (University of Derby)

Anne Constable (London Guildhall University)
Juliet Dye (University of Westminster)
Elizabeth Heaps (University of York) - from June 2000
Denis Heathcote (University of Greenwich)
Sara Marsh (University of Wales, Swansea) - from June 2000
Dilys Young (University of Lincolnshire & Humberside)
Adam Edwards (Central School of Speech and Drama) - UKLP Convenor

UK Libraries Plus member libraries - as from 1st September 2000

1. University of Abertay Dundee
2. University of Wales Aberystwyth
3. Anglia Polytechnic University
4. University of Wales Bangor
5. Bath Spa University College
6. Birkbeck College
7. Bishop Grosseteste College
8. Bolton Institute of Higher Education
9. University of Bournemouth
10. Bretton Hall
11. University of Brighton
12. Brunel University
13. Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College
14. Canterbury Christ Church University College
15. University of Wales Institute, Cardiff
16. University of Central England in Birmingham
17. University of Central Lancashire
18. Central School of Speech & Drama
19. Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education
20. University College Chichester
21. Coventry University
22. De Montfort University
23. University of Derby
24. University of Dundee
25. Durham University Library
26. University of East Anglia
27. University of East London
28. Edge Hill College
29. University of Glamorgan
30. Glasgow Caledonian University
31. University of Greenwich
32. University of Hertfordshire
33. University of Huddersfield
34. Keele University
35. Kent Institute of Art & Design
36. King Alfreds College Winchester
37. Kingston University
38. University of Wales Lampeter
39. Lancaster University
40. Leeds Metropolitan University
41. University of Lincolnshire & Humberside
42. Liverpool Hope University College
43. Liverpool John Moores University
44. London College of Printing
45. London Guildhall University
46. University of Luton
47. Manchester Metropolitan University
48. Middlesex University
49. Napier University, Edinburgh
50. University of Wales College, Newport
51. University College Northampton
52. University of North London
53. North East Wales Institute of HE
54. University of Northumbria at Newcastle
55. Nottingham Trent University
56. Oxford Brookes University

58. University of Plymouth
59. University of Portsmouth
60. Queen Margaret University College
61. College of Ripon & York St. John
62. Robert Gordon's University
63. University of London Royal Holloway
64. St Martin's College
65. St. Mary's College
66. University of Salford
67. Sheffield Hallam University
68. University of Southampton
69. South Bank University
70. Staffordshire University
71. Stirling University
72. University of Sunderland
73. University of Surrey Roehampton
74. University of Surrey
75. University of Wales Swansea
76. Swansea Institute of Higher Education
77. University of Teesside
78. Thames Valley University
79. Trinity & All Saints
80. Trinity College Camarthen
81. Trinity College of Music
82. University of Westminster
83. University of the West of England
84. University of Wolverhampton
85. University College Worcester
86. Writtle College
87. University of York

Authors

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