

# **Distance learning masters students in the Department of Information Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth: past, present and future**

Hugh Preston

*Department of Information Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK*  
*E-mail: hjp@aber.ac.uk*

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This paper examines the postgraduate student body studying by distance learning within the Department of Information Studies at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. The demands of both students and employers have been the chief influences on the evolution of the specialist postgraduate programmes and also the later generalist and further specialist programmes. Changes in the range of expectations are matched to the review and revision of individual schemes of study. The management of the distance learning programmes and the role of residential study schools and communication channels within the student group are described. The students' collective awareness of their peers is identified as core to the success of the programmes.

## **1. Introduction**

True distance learning through the open learning mode has never been an enterprise to be considered as secondary to full-time residential teaching and learning. Distance learning has been defined as covering, "the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises." (Holmberg, cited in [1]). Open learning will often be at a distance, but with flexibility in curriculum design and timings within the period of study that are prescribed neither by the course content nor by the mode of delivery [1]. Learning at a distance, whether in open mode or not, contrasts with the longer tradition of correspondence courses. These courses were based on the necessity for delivering teaching to students without access to conventional higher education. They covered many disciplines [2]. Little or no attempt was made to replicate any full-time course content, and often the correspondence courses would not have a full-time equivalent. In most cases these courses were simple staff-to-student pedagogy displaced by geographical distance. The learning environment was the students' own immediate surroundings, and their ability to share learning and the learning experience was very limited or non-existent. As an alternative, part-time delivery offered a broader learning environment but with less personal flexibility regarding time and course structure. In the UK, the arrival

of the Open University (OU) in 1971 was a sign that those lacking the traditional academic background for access to higher education were now considered part of the market for degree-level courses [3]. The initial OU formal structure for delivery based on the traditional academic session has been relaxed and the range of study options has been widened [4]. This pattern of distance learning development is not a characteristic of educational developments in the UK alone; there were similar developments in other parts of the world, particularly in economically developed but geographically diverse regions such as the United States [5]. For the [then] College of Librarianship Wales (CLW, now the Department of Information Studies (DIS) within the University of Wales, Aberystwyth (DIS/UWA)), the opportunity to offer courses through this different mode of delivery was attractive. The lack of an urban hinterland in mid-Wales significantly limited the market for part-time study [1]. Therefore circumstance, combined with the new opportunities for distance learning, led the Department to allocate resources for this mode of course delivery. It began with a significant, although relatively limited, disbursement for a small student base, but developed into the Department's largest ever academic and administrative investment for a high level of student admissions. Currently (November 2004) 872 distance learning students are registered at DIS/UWA of whom 599 (68.7%) are studying postgraduate masters courses.

All course delivery by distance learning requires a very substantial institutional investment to produce a course with complete academic integrity as well as the flexibility that students need [6]. The students accepted for distance learning courses at most institutions of higher education are in employment, usually full-time. Study is an addition to their professional and domestic responsibilities. For this reason, amongst others, institutions often start delivering courses by distance learning at the postgraduate, taught masters level [7]. Since the majority of students eligible to study at that level already have experience of higher education, the nature of degree-level study is familiar to them and the start-up investment by the institution is somewhat reduced. Nevertheless, it is still very substantial, and the advent of information, communication and technology (ICT) tools cannot be seen as a means to replace some of the institution's own investment in launching and maintaining courses. Rather, the tools are a means to enhance the courses [8,9]. This has been the approach taken at DIS/UWA. It has resulted in an evolution in distance learning from specialist postgraduate courses available only through distance learning, to more generalist initial professional qualifications at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels.

## **2. General overview of postgraduate distance learning at DIS/UWA**

Specialist postgraduate masters degrees were the first courses to be delivered by distance learning at DIS/UWA. The aim of the first course, the MLib Management of Library and Information Services (MLIS), was to serve library and information staff

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holding existing professional qualifications and already in management positions which might make full-time study difficult. The MLIS course started in September 1985 and continues to this day, albeit in a greatly amended form. In 1990, a further specialist programme was initiated, the MSc Information Systems and Services for Health Care (ISSHC). It was aimed at both health information professionals and other professional staff in the health sector who might have a subsidiary interest in managing information. As such, the early intakes included general practitioners, nurses, consultants, surgeons and other clinicians as well as NHS (National Health Service) librarians and information workers within the pharmaceutical sector. This course continues as the Health Information Management (HIM) masters programme.

The MLIS and the ISSHC were both initially offered with a fair amount of face-to-face contact. This was largely the result of the University's uncertainty about this new method of educating students which was very different to the normal one-year full-time form of study. Three annual study schools for every student in the MLIS and ISSHC programmes were the results of UWA's desire to keep distance learning contained as traditional part-time courses but with a bit more time spent off-campus. However, the Department throughout the early years made convincing arguments for increased flexibility, and the nature of the delivery format was altered. Nevertheless, it was not until a strong market for the ISSHC course outside the UK had been identified that the programmes were able to reduce their number of study schools. Holding a compulsory study school during the Christmas vacation was a problem when some students were attempting to fly to the UK from ice-bound airports. The University relented and the new structure for delivery was more fully implemented.

By the early 1990s, the Department had begun to realise the opportunities for providing courses for staff in libraries and information services who held no degree-level qualifications but envisaged a professional career in the sector in which they already worked [10]. The investment in specialist distance learning courses had involved the establishment of systems for their delivery and the employment of a significant body of staff to administer them. The staff specifically involved in the administration and development of the courses were initially existing members of the academic, administrative and clerical staff. However, the diversity and expansion built into the long-term plans for distance learning required a resource that could offer services dedicated to the growing distance learning mode. In 1993 the Department formed its Open Learning Unit (OLU). This Unit was established with responsibility for the maintenance of student records and documentation and also for course development, particularly editing of course materials. Later it was involved in incorporating ICT into the delivery of courses and support for the distance learning students as well as being involved in a European Union-funded project [11]. Once this investment had been made, the incorporation of further courses with greater student numbers was feasible at a level that would have been impossible during the early years of distance learning.

The undergraduate distance learning programme was launched in 1995 offering students the opportunity to complete a full professional degree programme whilst

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continuing to work in a library. A generalist postgraduate distance learning programme, in Information and Library Studies (ILS), followed and had its first student intake in September 1999. Since the systems were already in place for distance delivery through open learning, the new programme could immediately benefit. In particular, the computer conferencing facility, quickly became the chief source of contact between Department staff and the students and also between students themselves [12]. From an initial limited intake of 30 students in 1999, applications grew rapidly and in order to meet the requirements of eligible applicants keen to start on the programme, a second intake was introduced in April 2001 with the same number of accepted candidates. All these postgraduate and undergraduate distance learning courses are accredited by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP).

More recently, two specialist postgraduate distance learning courses have been launched within DIS/UWA for new student markets. The Records Management (RM) and the Archive Administration (AA) programmes are aimed at providing qualifications for professional status in their relevant sectors. This includes, for both programmes, accreditation from the Society of Archivists and, in addition the RM course is also accredited by CILIP. The AA Programme has a contribution from UWA's History Department for some elements, particularly those regarding palaeography, diplomatic and manuscripts. A balance in the archive field between the traditional historical perspective and the latest principles of document study and preservation enables the AA course to meet the increasing requirements for public sector and commercial organisations to, "justify official actions, to record proceedings, to explain and record policy decisions" and to provide the, "corporate memory" [13]. The RM programme explores some of the same issues, but from a broader management perspective. ICT as a tool in managing records is also key to addressing the need, "for a systematic approach to managing this information resource throughout its lifecycle, from creation to final disposition" [13]. Formal market research was hardly necessary in the cases of these programmes since DIS/UWA had been approached by employers enquiring about whether appropriate courses were offered. Although an Archives course had previously been offered to full-time students on a limited basis, the need for qualified individuals in these fields was becoming much more apparent. With only a few other institutions in the UK offering professionally accredited Archives qualifications, the opportunities for developing high quality courses for those in pre-professional employment was great. The RM programme had been another response to employer need where the jobs existed but the qualified staff did not.

The development of the postgraduate distance learning programmes and the changing nature of student and employer expectations have been reflected in the admission figures for the specialist and the generalist programmes. Table 1 provides a timeline of the admissions to these courses.

Particular points to be noted about these figures include:

Table 1

Postgraduate distance learning intake per annum					
Year	MLIS	HIM	ILS	RM	AA
1985	13				
1986	28				
1987	30				
1988	34				
1989	36				
1990	17	24			
1991	42	19			
1992	28	20			
1993	29	23			
1994	30	27			
1995	20	15			
1996	34	17			
1997	24	18			
1998	22	15			
1999	17	12	46	8	
2000	14	11	48	1	
2001	12	11	87	6	1
2002	3	9	92	8	31
2003	13	7	107	6	24
2004	2	4	89	7	28
Totals	448	232	469	36	84

- The peak in the MLIS numbers in the early and mid-1990s was partly a result of delivery initiated at study schools in both the UK and Hong Kong. In total there were some 48 students from Hong Kong who studied this programme.
- The increase in ILS numbers from 2001 was the result of a second annual intake in April
- The decrease in HIM numbers was partly the result of competition by other academic institutions and health agencies.

The postgraduate masters programmes have always attracted a significant proportion of non-UK students. This is greater (in proportion rather than total number) for the MLIS course than for the other schemes. Nevertheless, the generalist ILS programme immediately attracted non-UK students and, in particular, students from Ireland. In total students from about 40 countries in all continents have studied masters postgraduate courses at DIS/UWA, including for instance students from Austria, Barbados, Brazil, Canada, China, India, Lebanon, Malta, Mozambique, Spain and the United Arab Emirates. The geographical distribution of applicants reflects two main factors:

- Masters courses are considered of greater value in some parts of the world than in others.
- Word-of-mouth is the chief means by which information about the course is communicated. Although this is not unique to non-UK students, budget-holding former students are often responsible for providing financial and/or study leave support to junior colleagues.

### **3. Postgraduate study scheme structure at DIS/UWA**

The integrity of course content has been identified as vital to success in the provision of distance learning courses, and the Department took full advantage of the University of Wales's early introduction of modularised study scheme structures. The flexibility of a modular framework allows students to follow elements of their course either sequentially or in parallel. It also enables them to temporarily stop, re-start and pace their studies in a way that is exceedingly difficult with a curriculum based on the traditional academic session. The postgraduate modular structure selected by the University of Wales is based on module study leading to the accumulation of 180 credits. In DIS/UWA this is based on modules bearing 10 or 20 credits each. Part 1 of each scheme incorporates 120 credits of 'taught' modules, and the remaining 60 credits are accumulated by completion of a 15,000 word dissertation (Part 2). The two initial distance learning courses (MLIS and ISSHC) pre-dated this modularisation and were less flexible than would be expected with a full open learning programme of study. In particular, the MLIS core modules each bore a credit weighting of 30 credits. The substantial review of the MLIS programme in 2001 moved it into full open learning format. Therefore, the first programme to be developed was the last fully to open. This was largely because its curriculum had evolved incrementally over time, rather than being 'opened' at its initiation, as the undergraduate and the later postgraduate programmes had been. The University of Wales applied a study tariff of 100 learning hours per 10 credits of study. These learning hours would include module sessions at the study schools, but the great majority would take place once students were pursuing their studies at a distance. They would include reading of module study material and appropriate secondary sources, preparation of material for assessed work, and the production of that work. Practical elements, where appropriate, are also included as well as research activities. The tariff was a nominal one since open learning enables different styles and paces of study to be incorporated with ease [13]. As such, while the Department offers guidance regarding the likely need to spend around 15 hours per week on study, this is only a means for enabling students to gauge how their employment and domestic responsibilities will affect their pace of formal study.

Students who successfully complete Part 1 and who do not wish to write a dissertation are awarded a Diploma whereas students who continue to successfully write a dissertation are awarded an M.Sc.Econ. degree.

### **4. The evolution of the MLIS and ISSHC/HIM courses**

The investment in each distance learning programme has absorbed a significant proportion of the Department's resources. Staff effort and initiative are the chief resources, while financial implications of start-up and the direct monetary impact

of course delivery are secondary ones, although always issues that require monitoring [14]. Such an investment can be viewed in two ways. It can be seen as a one-off expenditure carried out for each new course but then maintained only at a relatively small cost. Alternatively it can be considered as a major cost outlay to launch a new course that will require a substantial continuing investment if it is to retain, and indeed enhance, its initial content and delivery. As such it needs to conform to the traditional service life-cycle [15]. An education resource is wasted if its benefits are very short-term and so DIS/UWA made the initial decision to support each course throughout its life-cycle. The UWA policy, like that of most academic institutions, was to ensure that the 'money followed the student', rather than supporting the original investment aimed at gaining the student. Therefore, financial pressures on the Department were very intense and cost/benefit had to be calculated very carefully.

The first distance learning programme, the MLIS, is now considered to be one of continuous professional development (CPD) aimed at the original management levels within library and information services. Its structure retained its initial core form until 2002 but the content of each element (module) had evolved during the 1990s to meet two predominant features of the changing student body:

1. The level of qualifications prior to starting the course. An increasing proportion of students had postgraduate qualifications beyond their professional accreditation degrees/diplomas and Chartership. Some had also completed professional development programmes within their workplace or sponsored by their employers. The MLIS now had to demonstrate that its CPD credentials covered more than the original general management content and broad academic targets. This was achieved in two ways; through changes in assessment structure, and through a major review that took place during 2001 (for implementation in 2002). This review is outlined below. Inevitably, with more library and information service managers holding existing Master's degree level qualifications (even though not management oriented), the demand for that level of learning diminished.
2. The changing nature of students' management responsibilities within information and library studies employment and the broadening of that employment sector in its own right. For example, public libraries had evolved from offering services "well supported by the librarians who work in them" [16], through "Street corner universities" [17] to their new form as the, "Living room of the city" and "Idea stores" [18]. Although largely rhetorical, this terminology reflects some of the changes that managers had to face. The situation in academic libraries had similarly evolved through the changes taking place in the 1990s, particularly following the restructuring of British higher education in 1992. Similar kinds of changes also took place in school and young people's library services as well as in the commercial sector and non-traditional information services.

The result was a complete review of the course and its transformation into a much more flexible programme with a smaller general management core component enabling choice from a wide range of management module options. These were designed to reflect the need for managers to handle resources that are ICT-based as well as personnel, finance, system and organisationally oriented. Now students have the scope to pursue pathways through their programme of study which can reflect both their immediate career needs and also the directions in which they envisage their career moving. Similarly, the ability of students at Part 2 to choose management topics from any part of their core and option pathway is now incorporated; previously students were obliged to choose a topic that reflected the mandatory core. An article based on a full study of the programme over its first 15 years focused on the motivation for study among mid-career LIS professionals [7]. It found that most applicants were motivated with regard to both their immediate career objectives and also their need to update formal qualifications to ensure continued eligibility for higher level posts in the longer term. With approximately two thirds of the students receiving complete or significant partial support from their employers, clearly the agencies for whom students work also feel an increasing need for up-to-date and relevant skills in their workplace. Interestingly, some of the respondents to the student survey (11%) referred to their possible intention to move outside the library and information service sector with the help of a Master's degree. However, in each case this was seen as a secondary motive for their study.

Although conceived and delivered almost exclusively by distance learning, the MLIS programme was offered in full-time mode for two consecutive years in the mid-1990s. This was in response to interest expressed by some non-UK applicants whose sponsors preferred a shorter course. However, the total number of students in the first year only marginally justified the use of resources. In the second year this was not considered economically viable. It should also be noted that following identification of a significant market for library and information management education in Hong Kong, the programme included annual study schools at the British Council offices on Hong Kong island. These were delivered by staff from Aberystwyth and jointly administered by the British Council and the Department. Intakes to this programme spur were ended in 2000.

The evolution of the MLIS has many of the characteristics of change within the other early specialist postgraduate course, the ISSHC/HIM. The health sector is a very dynamic one and information management was, even in 1990, of importance to a growing proportion of sector staff in the UK NHS, overseas health services, commercial healthcare and other health agencies. Therefore it was no surprise that the early intakes included individuals for whom information work was the immediate purpose of their employment (such as librarians and database managers) and also those awakening to the fact that information was a key health sector resource. Expressions such as, 'evidence base' in medicine and 'electronic patient/healthcare record' in health sector administration were still some time in the future, but the need for a more solid footing for information management was already evident. A survey of health

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information management distance learning programmes throughout the UK in 2002 showed that the distinction between the professional origins of applicants had become blurred. This was a result of the increased emphasis on information management in the health sector, not solely linked to individual employment sectors [19]. The work of a UK government Steering Group on Health Services Information (Körner committee), had been recognised since its report in 1982, but the form that it should take in the health sector was still imprecise [20]. The proportion of students from the traditional healthcare library sector was relatively small (approximately 25%), probably reflecting the very broad nature of information management in the health sector, but the small number and size of library services. Again, like the MLIS, change in the course was gradual and cumulative until the point at which students' levels of professional development demanded that modules become more focused on individual issues such as general practitioner information needs, rather than broad information issues alone. As such it performed a role in offering professional development as well as an introduction to some of the core elements of this rapidly evolving sector [19]. The number of students has declined recently, although in this case it is in large part due to a spread of market share as other institutions launch related courses.

#### **5. Distance learning programme management**

A core premise of our distance learning courses is that their academic integrity and relevance should be precisely equivalent to that of the same or similar courses delivered in full-time mode. However, the logistics of open delivery are considerably more complex [21]. Physical production of new printed materials and their revised/updated editions requires a tight schedule of managing module content which may already have been through a variety of versions, editing procedures and approval. The computer conferencing facility (known as Gwylan) requires constant updating and sometimes restructuring to reflect the evolution of individual courses and the common needs and expectations of students. The use of online learning activities and policies for contact with students alongside formal and informal tutorial records add to the many forms of activity. Some of these are also characteristic of the full-time mode, but distance delivery and particularly open delivery demand a much higher level of organisation. The decision to introduce the OLU within DIS/UWA with specific administrative and clerical responsibilities for the programmes is one element, together with its role in academic development in liaison with academic staff.

While the OLU's activities incorporate all programmes offered by distance learning, each programme or sometimes related programmes, are managed by a Programme Team. Each team provides a blend of academic, administrative and clerical input to the programmes' activities. A Programme Team Leader (PTL) is a member of the academic staff who, in addition to academic responsibilities for the programme(s)

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within their team, also reports to Departmental and University management regarding programme delivery. A Learning Development Officer (LDO) carries responsibility for working alongside the PTL with regard to programme development, and with other team members concerning overall programme delivery. A Programme Coordinator handles the administrative functions of the programmes including the logistics of handling the continuous 12- month programme delivery. One or two Team Secretaries carry out the clerical work including a wide range of correspondence with students, both in print and electronically, as well as the receipt and recording of coursework assignments from students. Open learning database management is another core component within this role. Since open learning requires that students work to self-set deadlines within the structure of batch dates for coursework completion, the level of clerical activity with regard to individual modules can be extremely challenging.

These roles and functions do not explicitly include those of liaison with other parts of the Department (apart from reporting responsibilities). This is a result of the fact that team membership is only one component of each team member's activities. Apart from the PTL and Secretary, each team member also has duties within the OLU. For the Coordinator and LDO, this will include both academic and administrative involvement in the development of open delivery throughout the Department. The Secretaries also have general departmental clerical duties with regard to both full-time and distance delivery. The PTL is a full member of the Department's academic staff and so has the research and teaching functions that would normally be expected of someone in an academic post as well as other administrative duties. Complexity is inevitable in the delivery of open learning programmes, but the management structure helps ensure that open delivery is not an isolated exercise within the Department. It also supports the effective use of outsourced programme development such as graphic design and in-house resources such as educational technology. Additionally, the role of the Department's Director of Teaching is to have an overview of all developments across programmes and to ensure consistency in course development.

A central student database has been developed within the OLU which holds detailed information about student progress (e.g. module assessment marks), study school attendance and students' self-set deadlines in order to generate automatic e-mail reminder messages. It also provides access to some basic management information such as overall student progress reports and pre-study school reports enabling teaching and accommodation/catering planning for expected student numbers. A recent development has been a dissertation database which assists in the management (including outline plan, definition and completion of dissertation milestones and so on) and records communications between the student and the allocated supervisor so as to offer a structure to the Part 2 study.

Access to facilities, including library services, provided by Information Services at UWA is obviously important for distance learning students. Work on improving services is constantly being undertaken by staff from Information Services and the OLU and standards have been embodied in a series of Service Level Agreements.

## **6. Residential study schools**

Residential schools for distance learners have formed a key part of each programme. These schools in Aberystwyth are intensive periods for staff and students and are held outside the traditional academic sessions for full-time students. In order to be efficient they must be able to run for all programmes in parallel within closely defined time boundaries, usually lasting five to seven days. Timetabling of sessions involving staff involvement in more than one programme is difficult, and close liaison with the University's Information Services is vital to ensure that students can access these services at any time available to them outside formal sessions. Distance learning can be a delivery mode for full open learning. However, experience at DIS/UWA strongly suggests that geographical distance should prohibit neither effective communication nor learning. Nor should it prevent communication between the students themselves. A study in 2001 that examined LIS education that is provided predominantly or wholly via the Internet concluded that growth had largely been in short courses provided by commercial bodies [22]. For these, student interaction may be of less importance. However, evaluation feedback received by DIS/UWA has shown that the students on all of its distance learning programmes appreciate a residential component. This takes the form of one-week study schools held in Aberystwyth at the time of each intake (April and September) and at other stages according to the credit accumulation by individual students. Programme evaluation is done in sessions held at the end of each study school and through input to the regular Staff Student Consultative Committee which receives formal comments through the computer conferencing facility. Each postgraduate student normally attends three study schools, including one Research School which focuses on work necessary for the completion of the masters dissertation.

The study schools have a core format within which individual sessions provide a basis for an introduction to modules and also to principles of open learning and the tools available to facilitate this. Around this core are sessions intended to enable students to carry forward their studies in the period between attendance at one study school and the next. This includes guidance on the selection of option modules and the opportunity with their personal tutors to develop a study plan. Each school also includes vital and valued social events [1] so as to enable students to build relationships with their peer group which can continue 'virtually' during their studies. Students frequently comment positively on the organisation of the study schools, the value of the skills sessions and sessions which introduce new modules for study. For some students the intensive nature of the study schools presents problems. As a means for students to 'touch-base' with the Department and with their peers, the schools are invaluable. The monitoring of student progress clearly shows that revisions and improvements to the school schedules, particularly the Research School, have a concomitant impact on Masters level results.

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## 7. Student support mechanisms and tools

The initial specialist courses relied for communication on relatively traditional means of one-to-one contact. Although the residential study schools offered group interaction, once students were in their home/work environments they relied on communication with staff via e-mail, telephone and letter. No formal channels existed for student-student communication. Some individuals communicated with each other on the basis of the networks developed at the study schools, often with cultural/geographical connections being the determinant. However, in the mid 1990s, DIS/UWA developed a computer conferencing facility using a specialist software portal, and later web access [12]. This is now a highly sophisticated means for providing students with individual and group support. It also provides updated information regarding course content, study school arrangements and other important issues that require immediate communication and easily accessible archiving. Even more importantly, student-student contact can now be on a group basis using the, 'Café' area of the conference. This is intended to reduce any sense of isolation as well as retaining the spirit of the study schools which is a major motivating factor for students. Individual e-mail communication is also possible, as well as information about the UWA library and computing services available to students and the feedback facility mentioned earlier.

All modes of study in UK universities have evolved to offer a fuller range of student support from registration to graduation [23,24]. Student support on the initial distance learning programmes at Aberystwyth during the late 1980s and early 1990s was based on those procedures and facilities that were already in place for full-time students. A greater reliance on telephone communication and postal contact was obviously necessary. Beyond that, the Department was limited by the boundaries of support imposed by the University which was still wholly oriented towards traditional full-time study. The support that distance learning students required when geographically detached from the University, resulted in a number of 'test-cases' which brought about revision in some of the University's procedures. These included a widening in student circumstances considered valid for temporary student withdrawal, extensions for Part 2 Dissertation completion and incorporation of employer support for their sponsored student(s)' progress. As numbers on the specialist courses grew and large intakes of students appeared on the new generalist courses, support mechanisms needed to change in form as well as scale. The following mechanisms and tools have emerged:

1. Increased provision of study skills support at study schools. Many postgraduate distance learning students have been out of academic study for a long period and few have studied in an open learning environment.
2. Computer conferencing (Gwylan network) providing Departmental support for students as well as student-student interaction.
3. All distance learners are allocated a member of the academic staff to be a Personal Tutor. These Tutors advise learners on their academic progress through face to face meetings at study school, telephone tutorials and through normal e-mail communication.

4. A significant enhancement of library and computing services available through the University's integrated Information Services. This includes library lending services from a dedicated distance learning collection as well as access to the University's expanding resource of e-journals and other electronic information sources. This has significantly enhanced students' learning experiences [7].
5. Support from the University's Language and Learning Centre for those without English or Welsh as a first language and also for those with learning disadvantages such as dyslexia. This service had previously only been available to campus-based students.
6. Pilot use of online assignment submission. At present overseas students can submit their work electronically and it is anticipated that this facility will be made available to all students.
7. Closer monitoring of student progress. Regular monitoring meetings held by the Team using reports from the database enable slow students to be identified, as well as poor performers and those whose rapid pace is compromising their performance. Information about individuals is sent to their Personal Tutors as an input to formal telephone, e-mail or Gwylan tutorials held at prescribed times in the year.

There is a very high completion rate for the postgraduate distance learning courses – for instance for the largest programme (ILS) the completion rate of is 92.4%. This would seem to suggest that the current support mechanisms are contributing to the ability of individual students to complete the course.

### **8. Use of ICT**

Naturally, if students are to take advantage of these support mechanisms and complete the wide range of assignments for coursework submission, they must have their own access to appropriate information and communications technology (ICT). The distance learning programmes all specify a minimum computer configuration that students must own or to which they have ready access. However, since modules involve use of web resources, searching of online databases, or access to the CD-ROMs provided with the course materials, students cannot be restricted in their studies by the speed of their machines. In preparing revised module content, DIS/UWA staff must ensure that certain course elements do not become technically inaccessible to students whose registration onto the course pre-dated technical changes.

ICT is integral to the field of information and library studies and all distance learning postgraduate students are expected to be familiar with basic ICT tools. A questionnaire survey regarding students' experience and skills with ICT is carried out for each new intake at study schools. As might be expected, this reveals a consistent trend towards a higher levels of pre-course experience in using a range of ICT applications. For instance, in September 2004 54% (27 out of 50) of the ILS

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masters students had completed the European Computer Driving Licence course, a computer skills certification programme (<http://www.ecdl.com>).

In particular students are expected to:

- Submit all the assessed work (reports, review, essays and so on) as word-processed files
- Make regular use of the computer conferencing system (Gwylan) sometimes as part of the assessment for a module or for interaction with module coordinators, personal tutors, the library and fellow students
- Carry out guided practical exercises which might form part of a module and which could involve the use of a range of digital information sources.
- Make use of specific software packages which might be distributed on CD-ROM along with printed materials
- Investigate the relevant literature (often available in digital form such as ejournals and ebooks) to support arguments made in submitted course work.

As members of the UWA student body, distance learning students, from all over the world, can, in the main, gain access to the same range of digital information sources that full-time on-campus students use. Staff from Information Services hold sessions during study schools to update students on new developments within the Library and Computer Services. In addition there is a dedicated member of staff within Information Services to deal with distance learning students and there is a special Library conference section within Gwylan.

## **9. The future of postgraduate distance learning students at DIS/UWA**

Few, if any, programmes of study in UK higher education can anticipate with confidence either future growth or decline in student numbers. Changes to the external funding of full-time students has significantly reduced on-campus numbers. Debts acquired during undergraduate study and carried forward to postgraduate study have also influenced adversely student numbers. Individuals who have gained pre-professional work, or wish to develop their existing professional knowledge and skills, often therefore find that distance learning is the most attractive option as a means to study while earning a livelihood [25]. DIS/UWA has found during each admission period that some students make an initial application for full-time study but change to an application for distance learning. Records of initial personal tutorials at study schools show that financial constraints as well as postgraduate fees, may make full-time study impossible. Changes in policy by the present UK government and likely by future ones will have some effect on this, but will not necessarily change the overall trend. From a department's perspective, there is a high level of investment in the initial course and a proportionately greater level of expenditure on distance learning than on full-time modes. This requires that the outlay be justified by the success of programmes. Complacency is impossible and change must be integral to

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distance learning delivery. For example, at present most pre-professional students find that the ceiling imposed on career development by the need for a professional qualification has not diminished. Although the specialist courses show variance in the height of the ceiling according to career type, a large number of students find the DIS/UWA postgraduate qualifications necessary as a supplement to their existing qualifications outside the information, library, archive, records or health sectors. Post-professional managers need CPD in order to advance to senior levels. The size and continued growth of the generalist professional course (ILS) demonstrates the need for professional qualifications. Whilst this demand is subject to the policies of professional bodies, principally CILIP [26], it is also the outcome of the expectations of employers. They need an indication of professional competence and the ability to consider job roles objectively [27]. However, the demand for specialist courses is more volatile. Most notably, the AA and RM courses have seen growth, although total numbers are still relatively small, whereas the HIM programme has seen a decline in numbers. Funding for students for an intense full-time academic course has declined. Some students are from non-traditional LIS environments where a postgraduate Diploma or Masters degree is a useful addition to curriculum vitae but is not essential to career development. Similarly, the MLIS programme offers Diploma and Masters degrees for a professional market where the majority of students now already hold postgraduate professional qualifications [7].

#### **10. Room for improvement? What has DIS/UWA learnt?**

Distance learning provision at DIS/UWA has, through an open learning approach, enabled well over 1,200 students to gain professional qualifications or professional development at masters level. For many this has been a relatively smooth process with the Department's support mechanisms helping to handle crises or minor obstacles to an individual's progress. Nevertheless, the evaluation sessions held during study schools, as well as the Staff Student Consultative Committees enable the students to identify and record their impressions of weaknesses in their course, both in terms of content and support. This informs DIS/UWA's understanding of an appropriate nature for marketing the course in all its forms. The process of fitting the course to the market requires the following:

- The course itself must be structured and delivered so as to enable student access to study and progress within it. It should ensure the relevancy that one would expect from an equivalent course through any other mode of delivery.
- Its form as an open learning programme must not constrain study on grounds of a student's geographical distance from the University. In many cases geography will play a part in other respects such as access to local resources, but the course should not unduly block study altogether in certain parts of the world.

- All promotional information and subsequent enquiry responses by the Department must not mislead potential applicants and their employers. Course descriptions, details of anticipated benefits for students and limits to Departmental capacity must be clear and the Department must ensure that there is little scope for misinterpretation.
- The cost of study must not prevent distance learning from being feasible for all who might, in other circumstances, have applied for full-time study. While the fees are not fixed indefinitely, the student's ability to earn money while studying should provide a balance between the immediate cost and the ability to earn. Other costs can be considerable, but the dedicated distance learning collection in the University Library reduces the obligation for each module's core texts to be purchased. Increased flexibility in fee payments now enables students to match more accurately their study costs to their savings and income. Fees can be paid annually, in instalments or per module. This latter method is becoming the most popular.

Naturally, success must not breed complacency. Even with the incorporation of change in Programme structure and content there is a danger of running simply to stand still. Development means more than change [28]. Students' interest in well established programme content, particularly individual modules, is matched by their curiosity about new subjects. The Programme Teams and the Department's Director of Teaching continue to take this into account. Related to this is a requirement to maintain the pioneering spirit that helped forge DIS/UWA's place in learning provision. Success in distance learning provision can encourage other higher education institutions to offer similar programmes. Falling full-time student numbers can be an incentive to this [25]. Insight in course provision as well as breadth in subject coverage is vital if the programmes are to retain their international reputation.

Distance learning provision is a global phenomenon which is seeing a tremendous growth in e-learning technology. The delivery of distance learning at DIS is embracing this but with core elements of established practice. This includes a level of contact with and between students that is not possible with wholly electronic delivery. It involves much investment but offers significant rewards in a rapidly changing environment for the education and training of information workers. While future students will expect further flexibility of access, the chief benefit from the varied learning and social modes will remain an awareness of being part of a student body rather than isolated individuals.

Naturally the enormous growth in distance learning student numbers is unlikely to have drawn wholly on students for whom full-time study is completely impossible. The study of DIS students on the MLIS Programme in 2001 [7] showed that its convenience was the most significant factor (28% of respondents) while a variety of other advantages of work and home based study were cited. Broadening of horizons, relevance to job, contact with peers and the experience of the study schools were amongst those most frequently cited. However, it is inevitable that a proportion of



these students, if offered no distance learning alternative, would have considered application for full-time study. Although a formal survey of this has not taken place, study school tutorials for each new intake reveal that some students had considered full-time study but, for a variety of reasons, chose distance learning. Sometimes applicants complete application forms for both modes and then, if accepted, choose their preferred mode. Full-time admissions show a steep downward trend and an outcome of this is that the DIS/UWA has been obliged to completely review its use of resources in delivering the course in full-time mode. An integrated approach to full-time delivery now includes use of the open learning materials developed for distance learning being employed in a true open learning sense. This involves exploiting their applicability, with appropriate modification, to students not in a work environment but studying on-campus. There is still work to be done on this, but initial signs are positive. For all modes of delivery, learning is the active descriptor, distance is secondary.

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