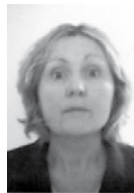


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# Grazing the long acre – distance students in Equine Science using the Glucksman Library at the University of Limerick



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## INTRODUCTION

This article reports on a pilot library-support service offered to undergraduate Equine Science distance students in University of Limerick. The service, which began in 2001, started as a postal, e-mail and telephone service and evolved to include providing access to web-based resources. The title of this article refers to the practice in Ireland in the not too distant past whereby people who did not own land grazed their animals by the roadside, known as 'the long acre'. Likewise today, it might be argued that non-traditional students study on the fringes of universities, attending outside what are core hours. Nowadays new technologies offer the potential for those studying at a distance to have access to a similar range of resources to traditional students.

The article explores where the equine science distance students are coming from professionally and academically. It outlines their programmes of study and examines how they use the library to meet their coursework needs. The service to these students is examined in the context of borrowing patterns and use of online and other materials.



#### **EQUINE SCIENCE DEGREE HISTORY**

The Equine Science degree programme was first offered by the University of Limerick in 1992. The importance of the industry to the Irish economy was highlighted by University of Limerick Life Sciences lecturer Frank McGourty (1996),<sup>1</sup> who led the development of the new programme. His inspiration came from Lord Killanin's report on the Irish equine industry,<sup>2</sup> which recommended that a course of study be provided for students wishing to follow a professional career in the horse industry because of the strategic economic importance of the horse and related industries in Ireland.

This need to produce highly qualified personnel with the specialised knowledge to exploit the potential of equine industries still exists in 2008. Additionally, the social and therapeutic importance of the equine industry in areas such as family-bonding, friendship-building, group cohesion and individual development are increasingly being recognised.<sup>3</sup>

#### **EQUINE PROGRAMMES**

The structure of the distance equine science programme offers flexibility to students. Individual link-in modules can be studied without a commitment to a course of study culminating in an academic qualification. Undergraduate certificate and diploma courses are on offer to distance students. Students can study at a distance to certificate and

diploma level and then come on campus to join day students to complete a BSc, Masters and PhD in Equine Science.

A certificate by distance learning comprises 12 modules. A further 8 modules must be taken to complete a diploma in equine science by distance learning. Subjects include equine anatomy and physiology, reproduction, health and disease, nutrition, genetics and grassland and grazing. Electives include French and German language modules, marketing, equine performance and equitation. Some modules overlap with other disciplines.

#### **DISTANCE EQUINE SCIENCE STUDENTS PROFILE**

Students are drawn to the course from all parts of the island of Ireland. They are mainly in the 23+ age cohort. While students are mostly personnel drawn from the horse industry – such as stable hands, jockeys, veterinary surgeons – other professions represented include legal, financial and pharmaceutical students. One student is a clinical psychologist who has an interest in working with horses with behavioural difficulties. He has found being able to do the course by distance and to continue with his current employment a major plus of the programme. A significant number of homemakers study equine science by distance learning and some retired people study it as a leisure interest. The number enrolled at any given time on the distance programme is approximately 110.

While full-time equine science students are mainly male, distance students are mainly female.

Some students have little or no formal education. They bring to the course the advantage of practical experience in areas such as horsemanship, breeding and folk medicine. As these students participate in coursework the wealth of their knowledge can be documented and shared with others, their study confirming effective practices in place through the ages and across cultures.



## STUDENT ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LIBRARY

*'A distance learning student should not have a sense of doing things from far away. In fact, the University of Limerick, through the IEI, offers a range of learner support networks, both formal and informal.'* (International Equine Institute, 2008)<sup>4</sup>

Equine science distance students are on campus twice a year for library orientation and information skills training. Their modules are delivered within the Sulis<sup>5</sup> virtual learning environment, which is in use throughout University of Limerick; these students were one of the first groups to adopt this VLE.



Outside of this, the students contact the library by telephone, e-mail and papermail. They are supported by a dedicated equine science distance librarian and library assistant. They are provided with support to search databases for reading material and any other coursework-related queries. Most queries are dealt with by telephone. The 'UL Library Equine Distance Students News' blog,<sup>6</sup> managed by the distance librarian, is used to post answers to students' questions. The students generally use the blog for queries relating to finding information for their assignments, for links to various information sources and as a permanent source of reference to the support offered by the librarian. The availability of the blog around the clock is really useful, as many stu-

dents will do their coursework outside of normal working hours.

The students need the material from their reading lists. Many journal articles and some books are available online via the library databases. Where students do not have online access the library will post the reading material in print format. Inter-library loan from the British Library is used occasionally, with books being forwarded by post. BL articles are supplied and forwarded to students by post and secure electronic document delivery.<sup>7</sup>

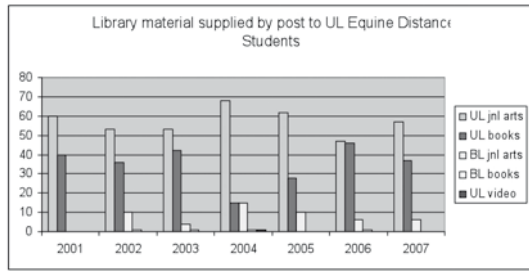
Science Direct, SPORTDiscus and Blackwell Synergy are the most frequently used databases, along with Web of Science, Medline and PsycINFO. Core journals used by students are in the subject areas of horsemanship and veterinary science.

## TRENDS IN THE USE OF RESOURCES

The chart below shows trends in usage of material. When the distance support service began in 2001 there was no remote access to electronic journals, 60% of requests from students were for copies of articles from material UL subscribes to. During 2002, 53% of requests were for material UL subscribes to, while 10% were articles from the British Library. As the equine science distance students progressed to their second year of study, UL-subscribed journal titles could not meet the requirements of the reading lists and were supplemented with BL inter-library loan. During 2003 articles from the UL collection posted to students stayed constant at 53% and BL articles supplied fell to 4%. This could be explained by the provision of off-campus access to electronic journals for the first time that year.

By 2004 the Irish Research electronic Library (IREL) project made even more databases and full-text journals available to students. The demand for copies of articles was at its highest, 68% of requests were from material UL subscribes to and 15% were ordered from the British Library. This could be explained by students advancing to higher levels of study within the distance equine degree and reading more subject material online, which increased the numbers of articles referenced but not available in full-text. In 2005 articles from material UL subscribes to fell back a little to 62%, as did BL paper articles, to 10%. This could be accounted for by more electronic journals becoming available online. The trend of falling demand for paper articles from UL resources continued in 2006, with 47% UL articles and 6% BL paper articles being requested.

Positive results from online resources provision are that the students are reading more academic journal articles. This is evidenced in the first half of 2007, when the demand for print copies of journal material UL subscribes to increased to 57%. These requests arise from references where full-text is not available online. At present it is not possible to measure the number of electronic articles read by distance equine science students, although it is clear they continue to request print full-text articles in addition to reading other articles online.



Students require a significant number of books on horsemanship and veterinary science. Most books are currently provided by post. The chart above shows books as a percentage of the paper material supplied by post to students of the last seven years. In 2001 books comprised 40% of material posted to students, dropping to 36% in 2002 and again dropping from 42% in 2003 to 15% in 2004. The figure rose to 28% in 2005 and 46% in 2006. The troughs in supply reflect where books in stock could not meet the demand by full-time and distance students. At present there is no arrangement to set aside books for use by distance students only. More paper books are needed per capita for distance students because of the time taken to post them to and from the library. The peaks reflect where book stock was increased to meet that demand.

It is not yet known what impact the availability of Wiley e-books, such as *Analyzing Gene Expression*<sup>8</sup> will have on the demand for paper books among equine science students. It will be useful when it is possible to measure equine science distance students' usage of UL electronic resources at a later date.



## CONCLUSION

This diverse group of students has adapted to new technologies in order to complete their coursework at a distance. Library resources are requested mainly by e-mail and telephone and delivered by post or e-mail or posted on the blog. Students also access electronic journals and some e-books from home. Even though the provision of more online resources has increased the amount of material accessed by students, they are still requesting as much on paper as before. It could be argued that these distance students are receiving an equivalent quality of service to those who are full-time on campus because the volume of material they are requesting for their studies has increased dramatically due to the ever-increasing availability of online material.



Distance learning and library support will continue in the future and will become more flexible as life-long learning is an expanding area of education. The demand for education by people of all ages who want to study and continue to work at the same time will grow. The present generation of distance students are pushing the boundaries of educational achievement because of the power of online education. The next wave of distance students will be the net generation, who prefer technology-based learning to sitting in a lecture theatre at a prescribed time.<sup>9</sup> This bodes well for the future of distance learning and the role of the librarian online.

There is a need to communicate economically and efficiently with students who may work at a distance from college in future. Providing relevant library resources via the web is would be one effective way to do this. Podcasting is one option to improve this service; creating webinars is another. The capacity of mobile telephones with computing ability is currently a platform for enabling all students to receive educational material

and library resources that are available electronically. This trend of increasing web-based library service to distance students may offer greater flexibility to all students in future.

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