

Book review

Your Books Are in the Mail: Fifty Years of Distance Library Service at Massey University

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The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand

White, B. (2011). *Your books are in the mail: Fifty years of distance library service at Massey University*. Massey University Library: Palmerston North, New Zealand (pp. 86)

It's an exciting time to work in a distance education library: the digitisation of content, coupled with an increase in speedy internet connections, means that students have access to a wealth of information, anytime, anywhere. In many ways this is a nirvana for off-campus students and librarians. It certainly helps mitigate the tyranny of distance and makes possible real-time delivery of information literacy and reference. Of course, these new developments have their own challenges so it is fitting to look back, to see where we have come from, and to place these new developments within the context of the library and its role in an educational institution.

Bruce White joined the Distance Library Service of Massey University in 1982, almost in the middle of the history he describes. He saw at first hand many of the changes that transformed the service in its first 50 years, and so is well placed to document its history.

The library building often stands at the centre of the academic institution; its contents and the librarians who make it work are a crucial part of the learning process. For the distance student, the bricks and mortar of the library, and the sense of place they give, is absent—creating a key challenge for all distance education librarians.

Remarkably, however, the need for a library service for extra-mural students was not recognised, nor supported, by all Massey University staff and the library struggled against the attitude of some academics that students should purchase for themselves any extra reading they required, or use any libraries they could access locally. White shows how successive librarians developed the library service in spite of these attitudes and how they worked to convince the university of the need for a distance library service.

One of the book's themes is the professionalism of library staff. Under these staff the library service has changed from one that was almost solely concerned with sending books to students, to one that is concerned with helping mould students into researchers. As White puts it, the library becomes “(frequently unacknowledged) the third leg of the distance education stool” (p. 74).

All you would expect to see in a brief history is here; the origins of the organisation are covered, the key personnel, the relationship with the institution and the wider community. A real strength of the book is the analysis of the various reports and surveys that have helped shape the direction of the service.

This is a very readable contribution to the history of academic libraries in New Zealand, helped because White specifically avoids making the book into a thesis. White does a good job of helping to put the Massey distance library service in context. Librarians from distance libraries or from institutions about to embark on extra-mural provision will be surprised to learn that many

of the issues they face have already been examined and reported by the Massey University Distance Library Service. All librarians, and distance librarians in particular, will get something from this book—but I hope the audience includes academics because it conveys the valuable message that library services are much more than just managing books.