

FIL Newsletter Issue 24

PORTRAIT OF THE GRADUATE LIBRARY ASSISTANT AS A YOUNG MAN

Alastair Flett Templeman Library University of Kent at Canterbury

My first day as Graduate Trainee at the Templeman Library at the University of Kent at Canterbury was something of a leap in the dark. Until that point my experience of academic libraries had, after all, been from the other side. I'd been a user, not a provider. My 'first day confusion' was hardly cleared up when I was told that I'd be spending part of each day in what was mysteriously called Document Delivery. I felt slightly better when I was told this dealt with interlibrary loans, though. I'd asked for interlibrary loans as an undergraduate; now was my chance to discover the chain of events which led up to the magical arrival of articles I'd applied for by filling in a form a few days before.

My first few days in Document Delivery rather merged into a haze of request forms and trying desperately to remember in which order, and for what reason they moved from pile to pile around the room. After a couple of days though, I managed to get into the swing of things and, over the next few months, office procedure became second nature.

The requests would come flooding in, our first job being to check them against our OPAC to ensure the library didn't already possess a copy of the item in question (sometimes it's even on loan to the person making the request!). Next, if it's a book, we look at a variety of online sources to make sure that the book does actually exist, and, hopefully, to discover that there is a copy of it at the BLDSC at Boston Spa.

Assuming all is in order so far, the next thing to be checked is the applicants themselves. We have to be satisfied that they are actually registered with the library and that they haven't exceeded the permitted number of requests. Finally, if everything is all right the request can now be transmitted electronically to the British library via ARTTEL.

The whole process is, of course, slightly more complex when trying to get hold of articles from periodicals. Then we have to check various electronic services that the library subscribes to, such as EBSCO and IDEAL, to make sure that we don't have any articles in electronic form that the borrowers may have overlooked. Only then do we check to see what Boston Spa has to offer. Then, all that's left to do is eagerly await the arrival of the LASER van to see what it brings and notify the borrowers of the arrival of their requests.

All this only happens, though, when there aren't any library users in the office making enquiries. Dealing with these queries can, in itself, prove quite a time consuming task when the questions are as diffuse as: can the borrower take books confined to the library to Switzerland with them? (They work part-time for the UN); can they make an unlimited number of requests without any question from us? (They're members of

staff); or why do we charge overdue fines? (The books aren't ours after all)? Those are the constants of Document Delivery.

However, even during my time here, there have been changes, most notably UKC joining the LAMDA elib project as a receiving member. From the trainee's point of view this has proved something of a mixed blessing. The main disadvantage is having to check the reference in more places (i.e. the Union List of Serial for the University of London and the CALIM catalogue for Manchester), before sending the request. Even more time consuming, is having to check that all the pages are present and correct when the articles are printed out. On the other hand though, request do generally come through quicker, reducing congestion. Most importantly of all though, it's something interesting to talk about in interviews for library school!

The five months I've spent working in Document Delivery have, without doubt, been incredibly useful. It seems that the majority of library work is encapsulated in one office: dealing with the public, lending of books, bibliographic checking and the application of information technology to name but a few. All that plus the enjoyment and satisfaction I've had in working there means that, in the opinion of this humble Graduate Trainee, Document Delivery is the ideal initiation into library work.