
Front-line service delivery: responding to changing user needs and patterns of library usage at NUI Maynooth



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BACKGROUND

Academic libraries have undergone significant changes in recent years. Emerging trends include increasing diversification of the student body, more student-centred learning and increasing use of information technology and information communication technology in how programmes and curricula are developed and delivered. Coupled with this, the provision of a library service and the way information is organised and delivered have changed dramatically in recent years.

Over the academic years from 2004 to 2007, statistics and user feedback at the John Paul II Library, National University of Ireland Maynooth, highlighted how these trends were impacting on library service delivery, library usage and the needs and expectations of library users. Users were no longer depending completely on traditional print services and were increasingly using electronic services.

The library recognised the need to support this hybrid usage and evolved to meet users' needs. We wanted to build on existing staff skills and to strengthen the library's role in the learning environment. To do this, the services team reviewed the delivery of front-line services and also sought to implement some of the more specific actions set out in the strategic plan:

'Evaluate and revise accordingly, the effectiveness of staff roles and the organisational structure in response to the changing needs of users.'

'Continue to develop self-service facilities.'

'Continue to upgrade public access equipment and maintain pace with technological developments.'

This article outlines the process of this review and the changes that were made in response to this new environment within the parameters of a library building built in 1984.

VISION

Traditionally, library desk services were delivered via four distinct service desks:

- 1 admissions desk, dealing with the access gates/controlled access and related issues
- 2 circulation desk, dealing with all circulation-related issues
- 3 copy centre, dealing with issues related to PCs, printers, photocopiers and microfilm reader/printers
- 4 information desk, dealing with all enquiries not handled by any of the other desks.

It became essential to find new ways of aligning these traditional library services with the changing library-usage patterns. This challenge forced us to consider a more suitable model of service delivery. A further aspect of the library that we were keen to develop was the concept of how 'library space' is used. The library building has three floors, with levels two and three predominantly used for quiet study. All photocopiers, printers and library desk services are located on level one, which has evolved into a lively group-study area attracting significant numbers of students. In our vision we were mindful of capitalising on this development.

Our vision was to re-deploy staff to provide a more effective service delivery model. To do this we moved towards a three pronged approach:

- 1 move all borrowing and returning to self-service
- 2 merge all our existing desks into one desk
- 3 make staff more available by introducing a roving support service.

CONSULTATION

A six-month lead-in allowed numerous meetings with staff to discuss these issues in detail. A training programme was planned and delivered in a two-week period in September 2007, when staff were trained in all aspects of the new merged service. Numerous meetings took place to continue to get feedback from staff throughout the implementation of the new service. All library staff, including those not involved in front-line service delivery, were consulted to gather a wide range of thoughts on how best to develop and plan this new model of service delivery.

BORROWING AND RETURNING



Library user and staff member using the borrowing and returning service

Funding was secured to purchase two machines. Finding the most strategic location for the new machines was the next decision. Following consultation with the stakeholders, such as staff, our systems department, health and safety and the buildings office, one of our existing desks was removed and the new self-service machines were installed in that space. The whole process, from ordering the machines to installing them in this location, took five months, from April to September 2007. We are the first library in Ireland to move towards this model and we are very satisfied with our decision.

LIBRARY SPACE

As was mentioned earlier, level one has become a hub of activity in the library. A regular request from library users was for tea/coffee and snack vending machines to be introduced. The opportunity arose for a branch of a café franchise already on campus to move into our library and we seized it. Level one now has a coffee dock area, serving snacks, sandwiches and hot and cold drinks. The feedback from this move has been very positive.

MERGING OF DESKS

Following the installation of two self-service machines, our attention turned to the merging of the existing library desks. In particular we focused on the added-value features we hoped to achieve by merging existing services and freeing up staff time to provide roving support on the floors.

As the traditional circulation desk was the largest desk and also was the first desk that library users saw when they entered the library, we decided that it would become the 'base' desk on level one.

NEW IDENTITY

An immediate concern was how the new 'team' would be identified. Staff made a number of suggestions and it was finally agreed that the team would be known as the 'i Team', using the international symbol for information. Staff also were involved in the design of a badge which they would wear when on duty to identify themselves to the users.

ROVING SUPPORT SERVICE



Member of 'i Team' offering roving support

'Students are on a more one-to-one basis with staff.' (Library staff comment)

All our desks had been located on level one in the library and users had to come to us for help. User feedback highlighted a need for support on the floors, with further confirmation of this need coming from the shelving staff, who regularly get asked for help. With this in mind we created bases on both level two and level three and offered roving support. Staff who were traditionally fixed to a desk were now free to rove. In practice this meant that staff could go with a library user to support them at point of need, whether that be at a photocopier, to a PC or to the shelves.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION CHART

Dates	Objectives and actions
Consultation June 2006 – ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff meetings • Management Team approval • Survey of library users • Visit to Information Commons, University of Sheffield
Borrowing and returning Summer 2006 – September 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demos and tender process • Funding secured • Visits to other libraries • Delivery and testing • Removal of one traditional desk • Installation
Library space September 2006 – February 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tender process with catering • Site survey • Installation of coffee dock
Roving support August 2007 – ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location • Laptops • Desks • Mobile phones
Training September 2007 – ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-week training programme • Continuous upskilling • On the job training • Follow-up meetings
Identity September 2007 – ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name of desks and team • Badges • Signage
Evaluation September 2007 – ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statistics • Meetings with staff • Survey of library users
Marketing October 2007 – ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website & Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) • Self-service promotion • Visits from colleagues in other libraries • Articles

WHAT WE LEARNED

Training

'Change always presents challenge and many, if not all, of front-line staff are coming to grips with a wide variety of tasks and information as a result of the desk merge.' (Library staff comment)

The same level of training was delivered to all staff, regardless of their existing experience. Less-experienced staff have opportunities to develop their skills. Initially, more experienced staff felt de-motivated. To address these issues a mentoring

scheme was introduced, whereby more experienced staff could support staff with less experience. In the future we need to develop a strategy for introducing new members to the team.

Team dynamics

Managing the merging of four teams who had traditionally had their own areas of responsibility into one cohesive team was a challenge. There was a loss of original identity, leading to some confusion about roles, and some staff felt a loss of job ownership. Innovating this culture of change was challenging. However, the enthusiasm of staff in taking on these changes is commendable, as is their willingness to 'try things out'. The role of the desk supervisor in managing these changes on the ground is a significant one and again her input and contribution is invaluable. In retrospect, one suggestion might be for staff at the start of these changes to complete a workshop/seminar designed to raise awareness of the effect of change.

Scale of the project

The planning and implementation of these changes were very time-intensive. Managing the implementation phase is ongoing and is taking as much time as the planning and consultation phase. The fact that we are still 'tweaking' the service is frustrating at times. That said, a slower and evolving process allows greater flexibility in responding to feedback from both staff and users, in our experience.

Marketing

It became obvious early on that marketing our new services was essential. Having a dedicated member of staff to market the borrowing and returning service was vital during the initial stages. We had a draw with an MP3 player as prize for users of this service. We promoted our new services in our campus library newsletter, library website and our VLE. Signage is on order for all the new services. Our library survey carried out in December 2007 clearly indicated awareness among students of the areas we marketed and areas in need of further marketing.

CONCLUSION

'Initially I thought it wouldn't work. It took a while to adapt but now a few months in I think it is of great benefit to staff and students. Staff is far more flexible, have a much broader knowledge of all library services and ultimately we can help our students in areas where we previously couldn't. We can now offer a much more consistent infor-

mation and 'hands on' service.' (Library staff comment)

Over the past year numerous changes have taken place at the library in NUI Maynooth. These include the merging of desk services, the transition of all borrowing and returning to self-service and the introduction of a roving support service. These developments have taken much time, effort and resources to introduce, more than was initially anticipated.

Further consultation will take place with staff and users to evaluate the new services and to highlight areas for improving and strengthening. One idea being considered is the introduction of printing and borrowing and returning services on level two and level three. Informal networking with other libraries has indicated a general uncertainty about the roving model. The future may see a different model emerging.

Overall, this has been an exciting process for all involved and we feel we are on the right path towards addressing and responding to changing user needs and emerging trends in academic libraries.

FURTHER READING

Consortium of National & University Libraries (CONUL), *Report of the CONUL Working Group on Information Skills Training* (<http://www.conul.ie/committees/documents/CONULISTfinalreport.doc>)

Phil Sykes, 'Putting library staff back into libraries', *SCONUL Focus*, 34, 2005, pp 4-8

Library Strategic Plan (http://library.nuim.ie/about/documents/strtpplan06_08.pdf)