



THE CHANGING FACE OF LIBRARY SUPPORT: A CASE STUDY FROM MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This paper will examine the face-to-face services provided by the Engagement & Information Services team at Maynooth University Library. It will consider the impact of the following factors: COVID-19, the LibQUAL survey and the Library Strategic Plan and where to go moving forward.

Keywords: *University Libraries; Reference Services; Students; Service Model; Future; LibQUAL; User Experience*

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, Reference and Information Services remain a core function of academic libraries, but one that is continually evolving in response to changing user needs and institutional priorities (Cassell, 2009). In recent years, this evolution has accelerated significantly. The COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented disruption, requiring libraries to rapidly reconfigure how they provide access to collections, spaces, and support. As Cox (2018) observes, the ability to facilitate independent learning, rather than reliance on physical collections alone has become central to library resilience.

The evolution of face-to-face services within the Engagement & Information Services (EIS) team at Maynooth University Library has been driven by three key factors: the impact of COVID-19, evidence gathered through LibQUAL surveys, and alignment with the Library's Strategic Plan. Together, these forces have reshaped both how services are delivered and how library space is used and understood. The outcome of this is a more flexible, data-informed, and user-centred service model, which is more adaptable for the academic library's future needs.

Why review our service & space?

Engagement & Information Services (EIS) is the department within Maynooth University Library that provides front of house services, manages library spaces and facilitates events. It is comprised of several functional teams operating across two service desks and the broader library space.

COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Service Transformation

The immediate impact of COVID19 was that face-to-face services were suspended temporarily and significantly scaled back. The implication of this was that there was a dramatic drop in footfall into the library building itself and a need to pivot to provide a virtual reference/information service, which saw several new adaptations: including the provision of click and collect and digital on demand to ensure that as much of the collection as possible was available to all users. This was complemented by an extension of the loan periods for library laptops to help bridge the digital divide that the pandemic highlighted.

In the Maynooth area, restrictions waxed and waned and this continued to impact not only how staff and students used the library services but also how well these services could respond to these changes in unprecedented times. Undeniably, COVID-19 has been a catalyst for change, instigating increased hybrid learning and remote working models. This reality, combined with the housing crisis within Ireland has seen a behavioural change in the Maynooth student body. With many having no choice but to commute to the university and this changes their engagement not only with university life but university life as a whole.

COVID-19 exacerbated a previously observed trend towards less engagement with desk-based services. This long tale continues and even today in person engagement at the information desks has not returned to pre pandemic levels (Figure1). However, what is equally evident is a slight growth in engagement in other ways such as virtual (LibAnswers) engagement, which is matching previous levels, albeit across more than just the in-person format (Figure 2). Looking at specific numbers suggests that the pandemic was an inflection point in terms of both the library's provision of virtual services but also acceptance by our users towards a hybrid offering (Figure 3).



Figure 1: In-person engagement with library information desks at Maynooth University Library

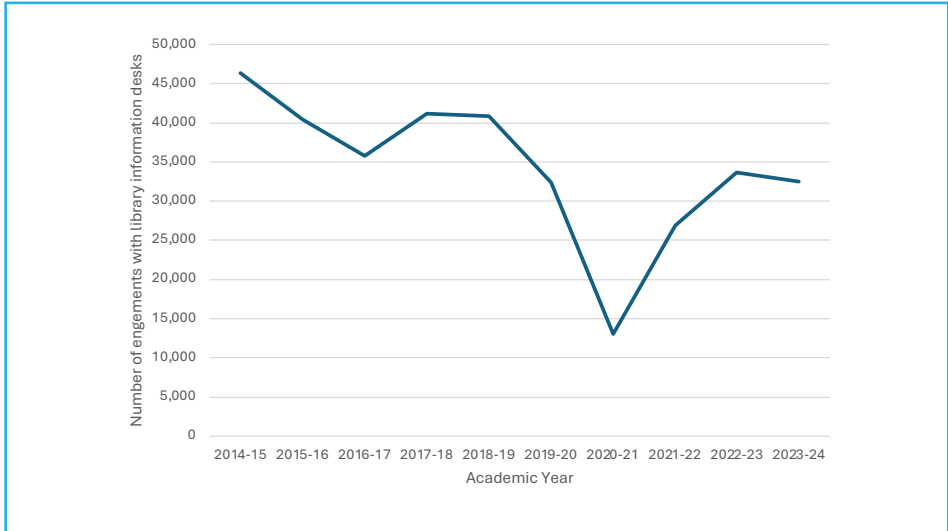


Table 1: In-person and virtual engagements with EIS at Maynooth University Library

Academic Year	In-person and virtual engagements with EIS
2019-20	32,702
2020-21	13,696
2021-22	29,051
2022-23	35,634
2023-24	34,197

While footfall was growing steadily up until the pandemic, the impact of restrictions was felt up to September 2022. Subsequently, footfall is beginning to return to pre-pandemic levels (Figure 3). With the continued growth of the University student body, it could be expected that this trend will continue. However, engagement has changed, and the key challenge is to understand how the student body and academics are engaging with the library in this “new normal”? What trends in user behaviour have been seen and how does the library promote itself and thrive in this new world?

Figure 2: In-person and virtual engagements with Engagement & Information Services (EIS) at Maynooth University Library

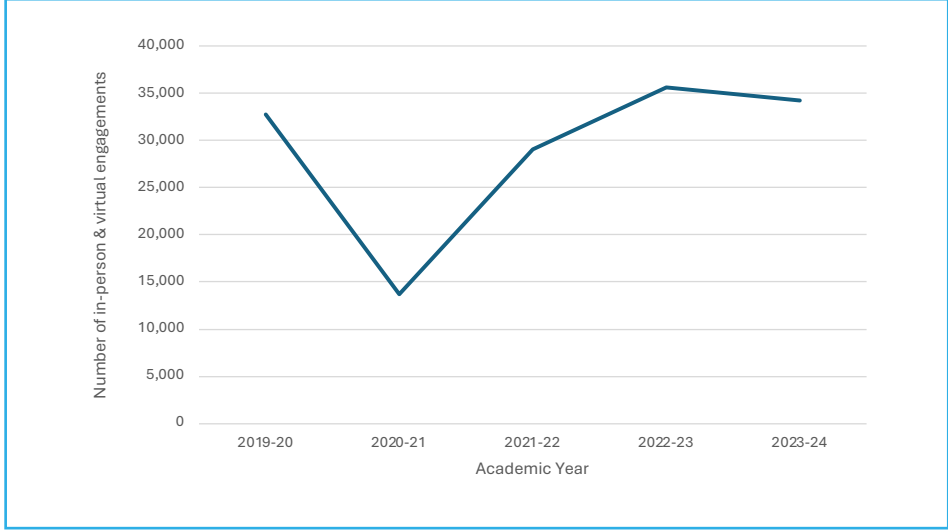
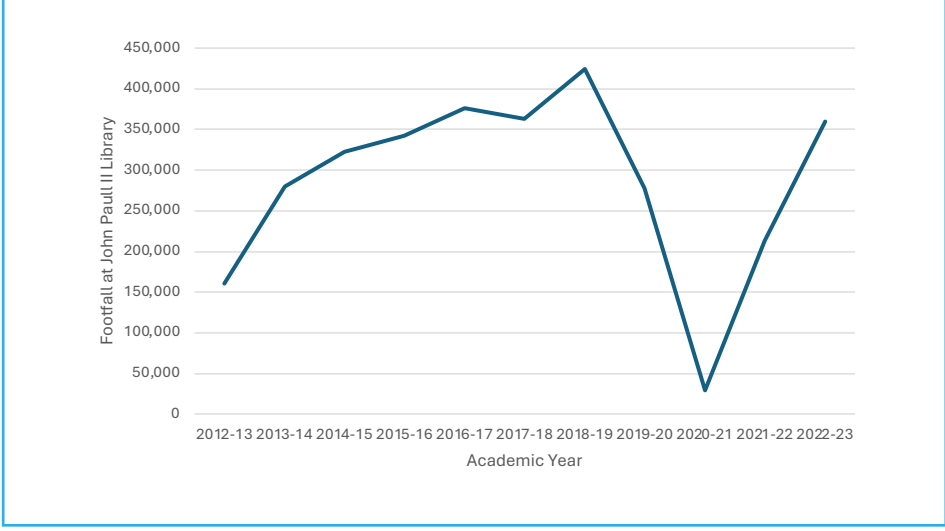


Figure 3: Footfall for the last decade in Maynooth University Library



It is evident that change is taking place. These changes are not just restricted to how the user engages with the library but also how the library pivoted at a time of crisis to continue to deliver service.

However, there appears to be less emphasis being placed in services themselves, as opposed to the space as a service (Cox, 2023). As such questions remain as to how best allow for the development of services to enhance the quality of the user experience. To assess this new paradigm in a more holistic way, the Library undertook a survey in the post-COVID-19 environment to better understand the new context it is operating in and inform the ongoing development of responsive, user-centred services.

Evidence-Based Change: Insights from LibQUAL

A LibQUAL Lite survey conducted in March 2023 and repeated in April 2025 assessed user perceptions across three areas: *Affect of Service (AS)*, *Information Control (IC)*, and *Library as Place (LP)*.

The library performed strongest in *Affect of Service*, with users, particularly academic staff reporting high satisfaction with staff knowledge, courtesy, and individual attention.

Information Control showed improvement between 2023 and 2025, particularly in access to electronic resources and journals.

Library as Place remained the weakest area, with concerns about noise, quiet study space, and group work areas. Although improvements were recorded following refurbishment, space remains a key challenge. This suggests that Cox's proposal of space as a service is critical – a view which is complemented by Clement's (2018) assertion that library space is both valuable and constrained, requiring careful evaluation of how it is used. While evolving towards collaborative and creative uses, libraries must also maintain their identity.

This indicates a strong demand for space but also a risk of loss of library identity in both spatial and professional terms, with a clear need to ensure a consistency in how services are offered (Cox, 2018). The library continues to

work with stakeholders to meet these new needs but must strive to maintain its identity as it continues to align itself with the institutional strategy.

Strategic Alignment and Data-Driven Decision Making

In 2024, Maynooth University introduced its Strategic Plan for 2024–2028.. The library developed its local plan based on the decisions made at an institutional level (Murphy, 2025). The purpose of the university plan is “to imagine and create better futures for all”, with a focus on:

- Research and impact
- Engagement and partnerships
- Students and learning
- Internationalisation

The library's plan supports the broader institution's plan while also putting the library on the map as an innovative environment for knowledge to enhance research and an open and welcoming service to all at the institution.

One of the key enablers for the success of the Strategic Plan is data which makes this explicit stating: *As custodians of a vast amount of data, the Library understands its value in providing evidence in support of our work. Leveraging the variety of quantitative and qualitative data will help facilitate responsive, adaptable supports for our users.* (MU Library Strategic Plan 2024-2028).

EIS activities naturally gather large amounts of data, and it follows that access to a broad suite of data should allow for evolution in our service offering to better meets the needs of our users as well as to encourage student continuation, retention, and success. EIS and the library as a whole cannot effectively prepare for the future without an understanding of both current and future trends to allow for a proactive rather than reactive approach to the provision of our services and how we position our space. The Strategic Plans at institutional and local level support the changes we have made using evidence-based decision-making.

From Drivers to Action: Service Transformation in Practice

Bearing in mind this strategy, EIS has shifted toward a more proactive model informed by data and user feedback. Since 2023, there have been improvements to the physical space, which include doubling group study rooms and increasing seating variety.

Two main areas for development were identified:

- Service model
- Physical space

Service Model Redesign

Another comment that appeared on a few occasions throughout the LibQUAL survey were regarding opening hours and the desire for extended opening hours. The articulated desire through the survey and anecdotal reports from those providing the service did not support each other. This difference caused EIS to investigate the measurable data.

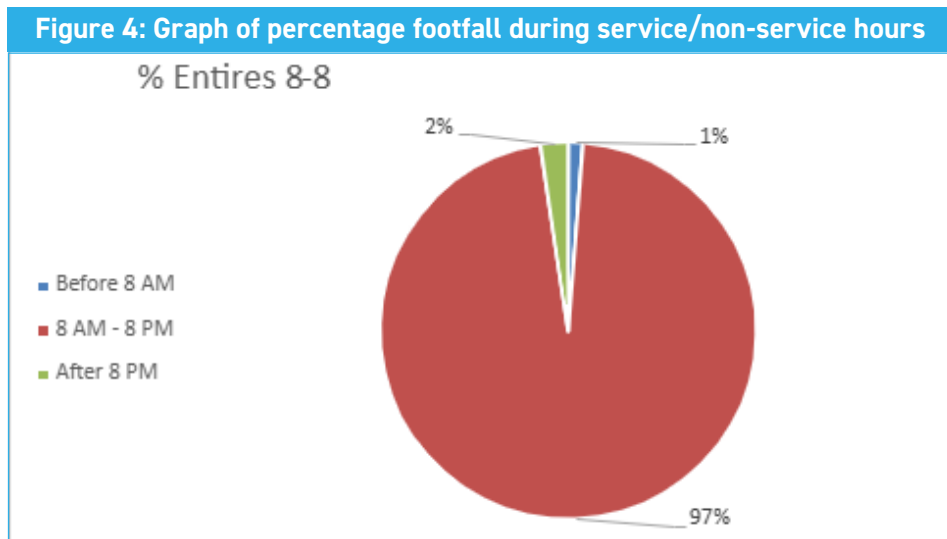
Using access data, we examined the actual usage of the library based on measurable evidence. What became evident was a pronounced and steady decline in users after 8pm in the evening. Delving deeper into the entry data, October 2023 was selected as a sample month to assess typical semester hours. An examination of 17 nights where the library remained open until midnight showed that, between the hours of 10 pm-12 am a total of 292 users were present across these 17 nights. This constituted an average of 17 people per night between these hours. Conversely, in the same month between 8am and 9am the data showed a total of 7,984 entries – 2,708 at 8am & 5,276 at 9am. This clearly demonstrates a more pressing demand for access in the earlier part of the day rather than the late evenings. The same process was undertaken using January 2023, a time when the library opens more extensively in advance of exams. The library was open for 11 nights until 2am during the exam period which saw a total of 126 entries occurred at midnight and 44 at 1am. This gives an average of 11 people enter the building at midnight and 4 at 1am.

In the main it is considered that such usage patterns can be attributed to the impact of the commuter population of the campus. The impact of the commuter student can also be felt with the increased percentage of usage falling between 9am to 5pm. It has risen by 5% since 2018/2019 from 82% to 87% of footfall taking place between traditional business hours. While Maynooth University has always had a strong tradition of commuting students, usage of the library suggests that this pattern has increased notably. This is a remarkably high concentration of use and one which, if it continues will necessitate serious consideration as to the way the library attempts to serve its user community.

Based on these findings, a revision of opening and closure times was modelled. Such a move has considerable implications to the shift patterns of relevant staff and consultation was undertaken. Following a successful proposal to library senior management, outlining the rationale and benefits of revised service hours, the new model was launched for the academic year 2024/25 as a pilot.

Opening hours up to 2023/2024				
Maynooth University Library	Semester Hours	Hours Building open	Service Hours	Total Service Hours
Monday	08:00-24:00	16 hrs	08:45-21:45	13hrs
Tuesday	08:00-24:00	16 hrs	08:45-21:45	13hrs
Wednesday	08:00-24:00	16 hrs	08:45-21:45	13hrs
Thursday	08:00-24:00	16 hrs	08:45-21:45	13hrs
Friday	08:00-18:30	10.5 hrs	08:45-18:15	9.5hrs
Saturday	10:00-17:00	7 hrs	10:15-16:45	6.5hrs
Sunday	10:00-17:00	7 hrs	None	0

Pilot hours 2024/2025				
Maynooth University Library	Semester Hours	Hours Building open	Service Hours	Total Service Hours
Monday	07:00-22:00	15hrs	08:00-20:00	12hrs
Tuesday	07:00-22:00	15hrs	08:00-20:00	12hrs
Wednesday	07:00-22:00	15hrs	08:00-20:00	12hrs
Thursday	07:00-22:00	15hrs	08:00-20:00	12hrs
Friday	07:00-20:00	13 hrs	08:00-20:00	12hrs
Saturday	09:00-17:00	8 hrs	09:15-16:45	7.5 hrs
Sunday	09:00-17:00	8 hrs	None	0



The Impact of the service model review

This new model has been found to meet the demand from both postgraduate and international students for extended hours, two communities which remain a key pillar of university strategy. In tandem with this it very clearly meets the needs of those commuting particularly those using public transport who have limited options in terms of arrival time. An unexpected but critical benefit is how the revision also supports the university’s drive for sustainability and our green campus agenda. The library is a large, energy intensive building and it follows that opening during the high usage times reduces energy consumption during ‘off peak’ periods.

The practical implications can also be measured with data. Results for semester one 2024/2025 show an increase in footfall on the previous semester. The merits of the revision in hours are borne out further with the data showing that 98% of entries occurred during the new staffed service hours of 8am-8pm.

The data is also showing behavioural adjustments in the form of logged noise complaints. Semester one 2024/25 saw an 80% reduction in noise complaints when compared to semester one 2023/24. Similarly, January 2025 saw a 27% decrease of noise complaints during the exam season, when compared to January 2024, with all of this being in the context of an increase in footfall. This suggestion from the data of improved behaviour aligns with feedback from staff that the students are associating the library as space for work. The lines of social and workspaces are being more clearly defined. It is worth considering if the optics of opening hours have had an impact on how the space has been used. Have the more “standard” hours caused the students to view the library as a more clearly defined space for work/research rather than a place to socialise?

Academic Year	Noise Complaints
22/23	450
23/24	225
24/25	120

Academic Year	Footfall
22/23	565,024
23/24	570,597
24/25	595,134

The evidence as presented supported the decision to keep the new hours for a second academic year as it was a direct response to user behaviour supported by the data.

Reimagining Library Space and the Service Desk

As noted, the 2023 LibQual survey highlighted that Library as Place needed significant improvement. In the area “Library as Place” the largest gaps between minimum, desired and perceived are the following areas:

- Library space that inspires study and learning
- Quiet space for individual work
- Space for group learning and group study

This indicates that respondents do not see the space(s) as totally conducive to study, with comments noting that it is too noisy, there is not enough individual or group study spaces. A programme of refurbishment works was carried out during the summer of 2024 to tackle these concerns and improve the experience for users including an increase in individual study spaces and group study rooms. Undoubtedly this has contributed to both the reduction in noise complaints, but also better scores in the relevant LibQUAL+ 2025 feedback.

Despite the various improvements noted, a comparative lack of signage has proved to be an issue for accessibility and usability of the library. This has been borne out in every successive LibQUAL+ survey. It is not clear (and difficult to ascertain) whether there is reluctance among some students to use the various desk services, or a lack of awareness of what is on offer. Improved signage should constitute an easy win and would allow for clear wayfinding to the services provided by the EIS. In concert, a redesign of the desk space itself to make it more welcoming and accessible may need to be considered.

Reflecting on the role of space as a service based on qualitative and quantitative feedback, it is clear that any limitation in the physical space does not negate the value of the service provided by the library staff. Building on this, promotion of the services provided by the EIS team, both in person and virtually underpin the evolution and continuation of service desks not only in the post-COVID-19 academic library but also at a wider level within the university’s Strategic Plan.

Libraries are often referred to as the heart of the campus, in no small part because the library typically has the most extensive opening hours across

seven days a week. However, a key element of this is the fact that the users can approach a person before and after core hours. Every LibQUAL survey references service and staff, in the 2025 survey 35.6% of comments referred to Staff and Services and it was the strongest area of performance for the library. This again suggests that the breadth of library services, from space through collections and support are underpinned by engagement with library staff. This is invaluable and reinforces the need to be clear in precisely what role the library is playing on campus.

Conclusions - The future of the Service Desk at Maynooth University

Maynooth University Library’s increasing use of data is not unique and mirrors broader professional approaches. Locally however there is a clear impact of this in (is?) how the EIS team offer a hybrid service, based on and supported by data-informed decision making. Such an approach must continue to be user-centred at its core. As such, it can be contended that our services did not just change but were reshaped by identifiable and analysed demands.

While the medium-term future of such services remains somewhat unclear, it is inarguable that the trends which were accelerated by the events of the pandemic, were already in place. Moving forward, any transformation of services must be firmly grounded in a deep understanding of users’ evolving needs and expectations. Engaging and measuring users’ expectation with both qualitative and quantitative methods will continue to be critical in enhancing services for improved user experience . Such an approach has been proven to work in MU Library and will continue to provide valuable insight into user behaviours, preferences, and priorities, ensuring that services continue to align with user expectations to help us create intentional service design not a reactive service. In person engagement clearly retains value but understanding how to complement this is critical in allowing a clear and suitable offering to the user community.

Ultimately, change presents an opportunity, not only to adapt, but to innovate. By remaining responsive and user-focused, EIS can continue to evolve as a vital part of the academic library experience.

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