
Library access 24x7 – the experience so far: is it a myth or is it more of a reality than we think?



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INTRODUCTION

The idea that libraries expand their opening hours is not new. For years libraries have extended opening hours to cater for varying library users and their library needs. As a result many libraries are now open during term time late into the evenings, well into the night, on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays. The introduction of modularisation means that libraries are open throughout holiday periods and the traditional 'off peak' times are no longer in existence. A further extension of this is the hybrid library and the 'off campus' access facility. The result is that many users conduct all their library business from home, their office or lab and rarely need to visit the library. With 24x7 access to electronic resources comes an expectation of similar access to print resources. Libraries are now facing the issue of providing 24x7 library access. Users want access to the library at any time. Our understanding of a library is still that of a place where print resources are preserved along with their online versions and while people continue to view the library in this way they will continue to demand access to all resources all the time. This paper looks at the issue of the provision of a 24x7 library service in the UK and Ireland. It originated as a short presentation at the Irish Universities Information Systems Colloquium (IUISC) in Co. Down, in March of 2002 and investigated the situation:

'Library Access 24x7 – the experience so far: is it a myth or is it more of a reality than we think?'

Discussion

Increasingly libraries are faced with managing the co-existence of books, computers and readers. The conflict facing libraries at the moment is that of the library as a traditional habitat for scholars *versus* the library as a resource available anytime, anywhere electronically. Libraries are embracing opportunities to make information available electronically 24x7 while at the same time stretching resources to open physical doors for longer hours to serve the needs of the scholar within the confines of the library walls. In an effort to investigate how libraries are dealing with these challenges a set of nine questions was mailed to the lis-link listserv. These questions were:

- What is your library's opening hours?
- If you are open at weekends what services does your library offer i.e. desk service, full service i.e. circulation and reference desk service, no service?
- Do you vary your opening hours throughout the year?
- What is your users' feedback on weekend service?
- Do you offer off campus access?
- To whom do you offer this service?
- Is it by proxy server or some other way?
- Is it operated in conjunction with the computer centre or other departments in your college?
- What is your users' feedback to 'off campus' access?

FEEDBACK

Numerous librarians replied to these questions from Ireland and the UK, with one reply from the US. The findings are as follows:

Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

Eleven third level libraries replied to the questionnaire. On average these 11 libraries are open 13 hours daily from Monday to Friday during term. At weekends they are open an average of eight hours on Saturday and seven hours on Sunday. This averages out at 80 hours of library access per week. Only one library did not open at weekends and this library is in the process of extending its opening hours to include weekends in the coming year. The weekend service varies from the library being unstaffed, to having a circulation desk open with the information/reference desk closed, to having all services on offer. One library is open 24 hours from Monday to Thursday for seven weeks

in the run up to the exams at the end of the first and second semester.

All respondents provide 'off campus' access. This facility provides access to electronic resources, licence permitting. This facility is available to all registered staff and students at the colleges via proxy server, Athens authentication or a password. The majority provides access via proxy server and in most cases the service is provided by the library and not in conjunction with any other department.

United Kingdom

Eleven third level libraries also replied with similarly interesting findings. Libraries are open for slightly longer with a greater variety in the lengths of opening hours. One library and computer suite is open 24x7 all year around closing only at Christmas for three days. Another library provides 22x7 library access (closed two hours for cleaning and maintenance). The majority was again open at weekends providing a varied service from a full service to an unstaffed library service. All respondents provide 'off campus' access to registered staff and students. One third of those who replied provide a joint library / computer centre service and as a result the 'off campus' access facility is provided jointly, mostly through Athens authentication.

United States

One third level library replied from New York. This library offers a full library service at weekends with librarians on duty. This library also provides off campus access to all registered users via Remote Patron Authentication. The library and 'off campus' access facility are both heavily used. 'Off campus' access is provided by the library in conjunction with the college computer centre.

WEEKEND SERVICE

All replies indicated that users are appreciative of weekend service and make valuable use of their libraries at this time. However, library staff noted that users 'expect the same service from five staff as from fifty staff'. As libraries do not always provide the same services at weekends and nights as they do during the weekday users' expectations can be unrealistic. Consequently, library staff are under pressure to give a full service at weekends and nights despite the fact that there are fewer staff working at these times and as respondents indicated night and weekend staff can consist of library assistants with few if any librarians. This leads to the issue one respondent raised that 'increasingly library assistants are being asked to

deal with literature searching and online databases'. Such issues necessitate a revision of staffing and training policies to provide the best service possible. With the extension of opening hours, library staff noted in their responses that libraries no longer have down times or 'no such thing as vacation periods'. With some libraries providing 24x7 access and others providing a service approaching this, is the next step for all libraries to open their doors 24 hours 7 days a week?

FOCUS ON USERS

The 1980s and 1990s has seen an increased emphasis on customer care and this has affected university libraries around the world. As a result, the need to understand what library customers expect in terms of service quality is now necessary for good library management. While users are making numerous demands, one of them being longer opening hours, this poses many challenges to library managers. Now more than ever, libraries must ask the question 'what is a successful library?' Is it more books on shelves, more reading spaces, more electronic resources, longer opening hours, facilitating 'off campus' access and facilitating 24x7 library access? Or is it the provision of all of these services to suit all of our users? It could be argued that the more user focused a library is the more successful that library will be and as a result libraries should give users everything they want. And while certainly libraries can not afford to be focused purely on the collection is it wise to be focused purely on the user? If a person's research requires simultaneous use of an electronic format and printed matter that need is met only in the library. Is that library user entitled to expect as much access to the print resources as is available to the electronic resources?

FOCUS ON TECHNOLOGY

Meeting users' needs raises many technological challenges. The literature backs up replies to the questions on the listserv that information skills play a huge part in supporting library users. Students are computer literate, becoming familiar with electronic resources such as webpages and library catalogues from early on in their college career. Yet increasingly, it is obvious that computer literacy does not equate to information literacy. To assume that making information available electronically is sufficient in meeting users needs is to err greatly. While human interaction with digital systems can facilitate access to information 24x7, it does not guarantee that library users will make best use of the available information. Making resources available in electronic format only, may provide widespread access in theory

but the practical implications of this are far ranging. Electronic resources are only as good as the technology making the information available. The varying level of computer skills is a significant factor in providing information electronically. Certainly, some members of the student population are extremely computer literate while others have basic or no computer skills. All of these factors must be considered in the provision of a 24x7 library service electronically.

CONCLUSION

The merits of providing a library service 24x7 be it electronically or otherwise raise many questions. As the respondents indicated most libraries provide 24x7 access to electronic resources 'off campus'. Most respondents are not providing physical library access on a 24x7 basis but are constantly extending opening hours to meet users' needs. Both the respondents and the literature clearly indicate that libraries are working to meet their users needs. Extending opening hours is an issue concerning all libraries. While 'off campus' access is popular with library users it does not meet all their needs. The library is still a place where printed text is preserved along with online text and users need access to both resources. 24x7 library access is a future consideration for all libraries and is worthy of serious thought.

References

- M. A. Thomas, 'Redefining library space: managing the co-existence of books, computers and readers', *Journal of academic librarianship* 26(6), 2000, pp 408-415
- P.J. Calbert, 'International variations in measuring customer expectations', *Library trends*, 49(4), 2001, pp 732-756

What do you think?

What do you think makes for a 'successful library'? How can we best equip ourselves to meet the challenges we will face in the 21st century?

The *SCONUL Newsletter* is keen to hear your views.

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Antony Brewerton
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