Making a grand entrance: implementing access control at Aston University

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Why introduce an access control system? It doesn't need great foresight to know that it is going to require time, effort and expenditure, at a point when all academic libraries are seemingly stretched to their utmost already. The question of whether the Library at Aston University needed access control had rumbled along for several years, before we finally agreed to go ahead with a system. The factors that influenced the decision included:

- The need to protect the principal users of the building – students, lecturers, and library staff. During evenings and much of the weekends, the building is open for study and self-service only, staffed by two attendants, so improving security at these times was seen as a priority.
- Thefts – it was fairly clear that we were a target, as three new PCs had been stolen within two weeks.
- The availability of the Research Support Libraries Programme (RSLP) access funding, for a period of three years from 1999/00, and the decision by RSLP in July 2000 that the use of this funding to install access control systems would be perfectly acceptable.

Before the decision to proceed with the installation was taken in July 2000, a project team made up of four members of staff undertook a feasibility study looking at the pros and cons of an access control system, and the options available. From this point on, it took another nine months before the system went 'live' – in total the planning and implementation stages took just over a year.

Benefiting from others

A visit to Information Services at Birmingham University, and email and telephone conversations with three or four other academic libraries that had already installed access control, was a vital part of the feasibility study. Everyone spoke frankly to us about their systems, and their experiences during installation and afterwards. Despite teething problems, no one regretted installing access control and no one we spoke with had installed systems, and subsequently stopped using them. We were under no illusion that the project we were embarking on was going to be easy, but we felt forewarned, and so forearmed, about potential stumbling blocks. We needed to think about staffing the entrance, having enough turnstiles that if one failed another was available,

having an exit turnstile to provide more meaningful statistics, access for wheelchair users, our access rules for visitors and issue of visitor cards, and so on.

Briefing suppliers

Fairly firm ideas of what we wanted to achieve needed to be in place before approaching suppliers. The project team brainstormed three options for the positioning of access control:

- Turnstiles at the bottom of the stairs, which would allow free access to the short loan area, general reference and the counter. This we rejected because it would not address one of our concerns, which was safety of our staff. We had recently had an incident where a member of counter staff had been physically threatened.
- On the front doors. This we rejected because we knew from others' experiences that tailgating, where users hold the door for the next user, who may not have a valid card, would happen. There seemed no point in doing half a job.
- Turnstiles, and a gate for visitors and wheelchair users, just inside the front doors, allowing free access only to the library coffee lounge.

We chose the last of these options and drew up two alternative floor layouts. One involved building a new counter near the entrance for staff staffing the control point, and the other involved resiting the entire issue counter. We rejected this second option as the counter furniture would have cost more than the budget and we were uncertain whether counter queues would create blockages to the flow of people round the library. We also decided we could not afford either the money or the space for exit turnstiles and gate.

Aston University already had a Smart Campus card project with access control on a large number of doors around campus. We would be asking the supplier of this system to quote for us, but to satisfy University purchasing regulations we needed to get a competitive quote. To introduce a second model of access control system on campus, even though it would be using the same identity card, would be hard to justify unless we had some convincing arguments in addition to a good quote. We wanted therefore to get a competitive quote from a supplier of a system that used the library barcodes on the identity card also used by our Library Management System (LMS), rather than the magnetic stripe used by the current campus access control system. We thought a barcode system would have some clear advantages: we would have control of the data and own the system in its entirety; we would be better able to accommodate members of the library who were not members of the University because their details would be already held on our LMS. A supplier of such a system was approached.

We gave both suppliers a written brief outlining our requirements, and had site meetings with them both, so that the quotes, when returned, would be strictly comparable. The supplier of our original issue counter was asked to quote for the new furniture, as we wanted both service points to match.

Ordering

On receiving quotes a rapid decision was needed, as there was an eight-week lead-time on both the turnstiles and the furniture. By now, we were into July, and the only slot in the academic year to do the building work, due to its noisy and disruptive nature, was the summer vacation. The choice was fairly straightforward as the supplier of Aston's existing access control system came in with a significantly cheaper quote, and the project looked like it would be in line with the budget. We placed the orders just in time. If everyone kept to schedule the entrance would be complete by the Friday before Freshers' week.

Building

A site meeting for all parties was held a month before the work was due to start. This involved the supplier of the access control system, the furniture supplier, our Estates department who would be involved in doing the electrical work and drilling channels in the floor, and our project team. A detailed schedule of the order of the work, and when each stage needed to be completed by, was drawn up and agreed. One of the intentions of this meeting was to ensure good communication between the different suppliers. This communication was essential, as the width of the entrance was only just sufficient, down to the last few millimetres, to accommodate two turnstiles, a gate for visitors and wheelchairs, and the counter furniture. When it came to the building work, despite our best efforts, communication between the various parties did not work well. However, the building work mostly went to plan and, apart from a bit of snagging, we were able to open the entrance on the Thursday before Freshers' week.

Staffing

After looking at how controlled access worked elsewhere, we realised that getting the correct staffing level and dedicated control point attendants would be crucial in the smooth implementation and ongoing success of such a system at Aston. Having already, for a number of years, provided a fairly low-key presence during study and self-service hours, we already had a model. However, it was felt that strictly monitoring and controlling access during these times would require 'security type' attendants, and a friendly confident staff team during the day.

After identifying the two categories of staff, we decided that 4 daytime staff (working morning or afternoons during serviced hours), and 6 evening and weekend staff (working a shift rota) were required.

Daytime staff would deal with student access queries, and greet, direct and be able to refer external customers, to the appropriate enquiry point. They would record visitor details and issue day passes. Evening staff would provide a security presence for the Library building, and ensure the safety of the building, including opening and locking up routines. The University's Security Office was unable to provide a staff presence, but we were assured they would respond to requests for back up.

Selection Process

The advert for daytime attendants included some routine clerical and library tasks and confidence in dealing with students and visitors. Because the jobs were part time, early retires and people with childcare commitments generally made up the applicants.
The advert for evening staff (because of the unsocial hours) did not attract as many applicants as had been hoped; however a group of Aston University research students did apply, plus one early retiree, resulting in the appointment of five evening attendants.

Training

Because nine new staff were employed in total, one whole week of training was arranged. This covered most aspects of the job bringing together things like customer care, security, health and safety matters, first aid, and the general procedures to do with issue of visitor cards and use of the controlled access system itself. The training proved very effective not just in preparing people for the job, but drawing them together and forming a team that they all identified with.

Supervision

Line management of the team is carried out by the Public Services Co-coordinator who draws up the work rotas, arranges training and allocates work. The team has proved to be a valuable asset to LIS by providing a pool of staff able to carry out a variety of clerical and library routine tasks, for example shelving and filing. After nine months, all of original team are still employed and all attend the regular monthly meetings that contribute to the success of the controlled access process.

Access for Visitors

Self evidently, the implementation of access control raises the issue of who should be allowed to use the Library. Clearly students and staff at Aston needed access, but there were other existing users to take into consideration too – students and lecturers from other universities, staff from the Aston Science Park, and members of the public. The decision was made to allow access to everyone who could prove their identity and their current address. This was not a difficult choice to make – we did not wish to bar visitors, but to know exactly who they were. We decided to offer visitors the options of obtaining a free pass, valid only on the day of issue, or buying a £2-50 card, valid for a year. The only proviso was that visitors could only register for a day pass or buy a card when the Library was fully staffed. Visitors would not be allowed to register during study and self serviced hours, when only two attendants are on duty. The new entrance conditions were widely publicised both to students and staff at the University, to local public libraries and to all UK academic libraries.

Outcomes

Has access control been worthwhile? Undoubtedly it has required a lot of time and hard work from many staff. The additional workload is not a one-off situation either – like the adage about pets and Christmas, running an access control system requires continual attention. As usual, it is the exceptions that take up the time – some of these are Aston students who have lost their cards, or (since the recent installation of a new student records system) with valid cards that do not work. However, it is fair to say that dealing with visitors is probably the most the time-consuming aspect of the system. Although most visitor day passes and annual cards can be processed quickly, there have been problems with visitors not having evidence of a current address. Changing visitors' expectations that the Library should be accessible at all times without any checks on their identity has been an issue.

What would we have done differently with hindsight? The main change would have been to pay more attention to the physical layout of the access control point, allowing better visibility for the staff. The Library was designed around a number of central supporting concrete pillars, which constrained the layout in the foyer. If funds become available, we would still consider exit turnstiles, as these would offer better security; the system could then be programmed to prevent two users entering on one card and to prevent users trying to enter via the exit gate.

The positives though definitely outweigh the negatives. Changing the staffing structure to accommodate access control has had the very beneficial side-effect that we have been able to extend opening hours by over a thousand hours per annum. Most importantly, though, in terms of security the Library provides a much safer environment, a factor which is likely to become increasingly important in the years ahead.

University of Cambridge: the Betty and Gordon Moore Library opens

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The Betty and Gordon Moore Library, located alongside the Centre for Mathematical Sciences and the Isaac Newton Institute at Wilberforce Road in West Cambridge, is the newest dependent library of the University Library and opened to readers on 1 October 2001.

The Moore library houses the University's main working collections supporting research in the physical sciences, mathematics and technology and brings under one roof print material from four separate locations. The Library, therefore, is a cornerstone of the University strategy to concentrate teaching and research in the physical sciences and technology within the West Cambridge development.