
24 hour library opening at LSE



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LSE cannot claim to be at the forefront in offering 24 hour library opening; several universities have been doing it for some time, with Bath probably holding the record at eight years. Liz Lockey's article in the *SCONUL Newsletter* in spring 2003 gave an interesting account of a conference on the subject held at the University of Sunderland in November 2002. Conference speakers described 24 x 7 opening operating successfully at the University of Sunderland, Liverpool John Moores and Sheffield Hallam. But although LSE is rather late in the field, SCONUL colleagues may be interested in our experience of running a pilot service during the exam period this year. As an inner city, non-campus university, there are potential issues (or at least concerns) with regard to late night transport and security. Those who are not yet offering 24 hour opening, but are thinking of dipping a toe in the water, may be reassured by our findings that many of the concerns expressed before the pilot turned out to be unfounded.

At LSE, we had been discussing 24 hour opening for some years, linked with the major redevelopment of our building (which re-opened in April 2001). We had submitted funding bids for term-time 24 hour opening for three years running without success: it never reached the top of the funding committee's priorities. In our budget bid for 2004-05, we lowered our sights and proposed a pilot for just the eight weeks of the exam period, during May and June. Some academic colleagues were sceptical about the need for extended opening and its value relative to other services. Library staff argued that we would never know if there was real demand unless we tried a pilot. At the same time the Students' Union was conducting a vigorous campaign for 24 hour opening. Such is the power of the student customer that not only was funding allocated for the pilot, but it was agreed to run it in May-June 2004, rather than waiting for the next financial year. We quickly set up a working group to plan the extended open-

ing; membership included representatives of the relevant services (Estates, IT, Security) and the general secretary of the Students' Union. Having a student representative proved very helpful, both to get a student viewpoint and to help with publicising the new service.

There was still a significant amount of scepticism amongst some academic colleagues, particularly those on funding committees. We were tasked with extensive monitoring of the pilot and initially asked to come up with a target usage figure which would determine the success or otherwise of the pilot. Not wanting to set an arbitrary figure, we consulted colleagues via the SCONUL list as to whether any of them had set usage targets in advance. As usual, colleagues responded very helpfully. The majority view was that it was quite evident when 24 hour opening was a success; target figures were not necessary. Several respondents also spoke of the immense student goodwill generated by the extended hours. So, armed with this evidence, we declined to set any target figure, but put in place a range of monitoring mechanisms. These included:

- hourly turnstile entry figures
- hourly headcounts carried out by security staff patrolling the building
- automatic logging of PC usage
- self-issue statistics
- special feedback forms only made available during the extended hours.

Normal term-time opening hours are to 11pm on weekdays and 9pm at weekends, with staffed services closing an hour before. We planned to close services as normal at 10pm and 8pm respectively, with security staff in place throughout the night. Library security is outsourced to a commercial firm, so it was a simple matter to book two overnight security guards. A third member of the LSE's security staff was transferred to the library from the existing 24 hour PC facility, which was closed for the duration of the pilot. A publicity campaign was organised and 24 hour opening began as scheduled on 3 May.

It soon became evident that we had a major success on our hands. LSE has around 7500 students and the library has c.1600 study spaces. On the first night of 24 hour opening (a Bank Holiday) there were over 500 students in the library at midnight, with 200 in at 4am. Usage built up to a peak in mid-May, with the highest number of students recorded being 984 at 11pm on 14 May. Students continued to vote with their feet and usage

remained high, only tailing off in the last week of the eight week pilot, when some students had finished their exams. When the Librarian reported the first week's usage statistics to the LSE's senior management team, it was to the accompaniment of jaws dropping around the table. Everyone, including possibly the Students' Union, was surprised at the number of students using the library overnight.

A number of concerns had been expressed prior to the pilot. These included: security and safety of students; availability of transport; pressure on students to work excessively hard. In the event, security staff did a good job, carrying out hourly patrols and dealing with the occasional minor incident sensibly. There had been much discussion about potential transport problems in planning the pilot and a phone line to a taxi service was provided. However, for the 225 students filling in feedback forms, it appeared transport was no problem. Their main modes of transport were:

- Night bus (40%)
- Walking (35%)
- Bicycle (6%)
- Tube (4%)

Only 2% used taxis and one student apparently skated! LSE does have a number of halls of residence within half an hour's walk, and perhaps Ken Livingstone's additional London night buses were a factor. The rather paternalistic view that opening the library overnight would put more pressure on students was contradicted by student feedback. Several students commented that the extended hours relieved pressure on them, e.g.:

'I'm not under pressure to come in early and leave by 11pm, I can relax more and adapt my programme of study to suit my life'

'I work better at night, it provides a quiet place, relieves stress if you forget something in the daytime'

Problems encountered were the usual ones: eating and drinking, with consequent litter; noise, with mobile phones and groups of students working or chatting. The unexpectedly high levels of usage and the litter problems put severe pressure on cleaning staff. Anticipated security problems did not materialise; the worst that happened was an impromptu game of football outside the building one night. A member of library staff came in at midnight one evening and stayed for a few hours, talking to students, who were extremely apprecia-

tive of the new service. She reported that security staff were doing a good job, but noted the scale of the eating and drinking going on and the poor state of cleanliness. Some additional cleaning staff were allocated during the course of the pilot, but this had not been budgeted for by our estates division, so only limited resources were available.

A problem we had not anticipated was the widespread reservation of study places by students leaving belongings on them (the towels on sunbeds syndrome). This is always an issue at busy times, but items are normally removed at closing time. With the library open 24 hours, some of these belongings became permanent fixtures, leading to strong complaints from other students. Library staff considered the problem and, perhaps influenced by Euro 2004 football, came up with a yellow and red card system. Security staff patrolling the building would leave a yellow card on the desk, giving students an hour's grace. If the unaccompanied belongings remained in place at the next hourly patrol, the yellow card would be replaced by a red one, authorising other students to move the belongings to one side and use the study place. The scheme was advertised widely to students and within a very short time peer pressure began to operate and the problem was resolved.

The evident popularity of 24 hour opening with students meant that there was widespread acceptance that it should continue. Even the most confirmed sceptics accepted that this was a service students clearly wanted. Not only that, it was agreed to extend the period from eight to eleven weeks, starting three weeks before exams. Funds for additional cleaning staff have been allocated and the café outside the library is to open for longer hours, in response to student demand.

So, what are the lessons we have learned from the experience?

- A pilot is a very good way to test whether apparent student demand for a service is real or not (we probably knew that already)
- Solutions can almost always be found to operational barriers to new services if the will to find them is there (we probably knew that too).
- Working together with the Students' Union towards a common goal gives real benefits in terms of student goodwill and publicity to the student body (we had not fully appreciated that).
- When planning services we should try to find out more about how students actually

do their studying, rather than just make assumptions (we probably had not quite thought of it that way.)

It makes sense to maximise usage of expensive facilities if the customer demand is there. In the exam and pre-exam period our study spaces are 97-99% occupied at peak times of day. By extending our weekly opening hours from 97 to 168 during this period, we increased the available study space hours by 58%, for a marginal additional cost of under £3,000 per week. This relieved pressure on daytime study spaces and earned a massive amount of goodwill and appreciation from the student body. One student commented: 'This is the best improvement to student life.'