

The potential of staff-less academic libraries in the UK

A thought piece



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Strategic challenge

The University of Wolverhampton is a multi-site campus spanning a wide geographic area, with locations in Wolverhampton, Walsall, Telford and Burton-upon-Trent. In each of these localities there is a library managed centrally by the Directorate of Academic Support, a converged service comprising Library, IT Services and the College of Learning & Teaching. The university's main campus in Wolverhampton is currently in three locations across the city, with a fourth, Springfield, currently under development (University of Wolverhampton, 2017). As part of its widening participation and outreach work, the university is increasingly using Distributed Learning Centres (DLCs) to provide a local presence in other areas, often in partnership with other agencies. To date these DLCs include Telford, Stafford and Hereford. In this context, an increasing strategic challenge is to provide a coherent and relevant physical library service to a growing number of constituent parts, whilst maintaining a viable operational budget.

A road travelled

The Directorate has had a watching brief on the library technology market for some time and has been in a preparatory transition mode for several years to make ready for the move to a multi-tenanted cloud-based system. As part of this transition we were the first UK academic library to move the day-to-day operational maintenance of our incumbent Library Management System (LMS) to a managed service and to outsource its technical infrastructure. This afforded us the opportunity to disband our Information Systems Team, who had been responsible for maintaining the LMS and introduce new roles such as a Digital Library Analyst, which is akin to that of a Business Systems Analyst. As a consequence, we shifted emphasis away from system maintenance and towards business workflow and user experience improvements (Dowd and Machell, 2013).

The road ahead

We are about to go to tender for what we are branding internally as a 'digital library platform' (DLP). This is a combination of Library Services Platform, Web Scale Discovery, Reading List Management System and a move to RFID across all our libraries. This is in the context of a wider Digital Campus transformation programme (University of Wolverhampton, 2016). A key driver for our DLP approach is placing library services in the digital and physical spaces students frequent and ensuring that their information requirements are met on a just-in-time basis wherever required. We have taken a 'big bang' approach to the DLP to maximise impact and benefits.

Strategic opportunity

While we are a relatively late adopter of RFID, we were an early adopter of self-service and have developed our front-facing services around self-service for well over a decade. We are keen to explore the options RFID provides us with for solving both student demand for increased access to library resources and supporting teaching and learning at increasingly dispersed geographic locations. We currently offer two models of out-of-hours 24x7 opening, for:

- larger campuses through agency security staff, with full access to library stock
- smaller campuses, such as Telford, with unstaffed library space remaining open in a shared building but with the stock secured and inaccessible.

Written into our planning for roll-out of RFID is deployment of a staff-less library solution to cover out-of-hours at our Telford campus. It will be developed as a proof of concept, to investigate potential deployment at other sites in the future. This is in line with our strategic direction in increasing 24x7 services, a recent example being the introduction of overnight skilled library support using SCONUL's virtual out-of-hours enquiry service.

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A thought piece

Our overall strategic approach in using technology is to reduce administrative transactional activity. This will enable us to re-focus our staff profile on new and emerging specialisms, e.g. digital capabilities, research data management, etc.

The staff-less library

Johanssen (2017) describes the 'open library', as distinct from the 'self-service' library, by virtue of its offering users prolonged opening hours during which at least some portion is entirely unstaffed. Through use of technology, open libraries continue to allow library users to discover, access, use and borrow physical library materials.

The technology behind the open library concept interfaces with self-service kiosks and the LMS, to monitor and control a range of building systems, including security, door access, lights, cameras, etc. It is commonly used in conjunction with RFID-tagged book stock, which allows logging of items leaving the building unissued in addition to simply reporting alarm trigger events.

The first open libraries emerged in Denmark in 2004, and the concept has been widely adopted in public libraries – initially in Scandinavia (Holmgard Larsen, 2013), but today across the world (Johanssen, 2017). In the UK, by July 2016 there were 24 public libraries in nine local authorities which had implemented the open library concept (Kelly, 2016). Open libraries have been used as an option by some UK local authorities to maintain or extend library opening hours at a time when austerity is forcing reduced opening hours and library closure.

Proof of concept

Student feedback has welcomed 24x7 access to the library at Telford but has been tinged with frustration due to lack of comparable access to stock. Our aim at Telford is to provide users with access to library space and physical library resources out of hours without additional staffing costs. This will be achieved through adoption of an open library solution consisting of:

- door access controlled by library card
- security cameras monitoring library space (already in place)
- event-driven photographs at library security gates (e.g. photo is taken of anyone setting the alarm off as they leave the library)
- security gates capable of reading and reporting on material which leaves the library unissued; and any associated library card on the person triggering the alarm.

At this stage, this pilot will not include the broader open library capabilities around building management.

In developing the parameters of our proof of concept we recognise a distinction from many public libraries because at Wolverhampton our campuses provide a closed environment which is staffed by security staff and subject to CCTV monitoring 24 hours a day, thus reducing many of the security concerns that have been raised in the public library arena.

Strategic aspirations

We are not aware of any other UK academic libraries that have adopted a technological approach to the staff-less library, although clearly operating small libraries on a trust basis is not a new concept in UK higher education. We also appreciate that staff-less libraries have developed a negative connotation by association with austerity measures, particularly in the public library sector. Thus, rightly or wrongly, public opinion has tended to identify staff-less libraries with job-cuts, loss of service and security concerns (Public Libraries News, 2017).

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A thought piece

The premise for our proof of concept can be divided in to three overlapping areas:

- 1 *Potential to realign staff resources in order to focus and maximise our efforts on student impact and attainment and wider university imperatives (see table below)*

We appreciate that this will require our skill set to widen out beyond traditional library skills, e.g. see above regarding Digital Library Analyst role. In this context, open libraries technology facilitates the required re-profiling.

Open access and open data with regard to knowledge-sharing
Increased support for on-line / blended learning regardless of location
Staff and student development, e.g. digital capabilities
Supporting the institution with regard to the changing quality assessment and assurance regime, e.g. TEF, REF 2021
Proliferation of partnerships and growth in broader university community, e.g. increased number of apprenticeships and development of TNE offer

Key extracts from Directorate of Academic Support's Strategic Plan 2016–2021

A focus for all libraries in recent decades has been seeking efficiencies with regard to the supply chain, e.g. shelf-ready and cataloguing. We believe this is the next evolutionary step in workflow improvement with regard to content management.

- 2 *Influence future space design in order to realise the benefits of shared and flexible open library environments within the workflow of our users*

For some time library design has been predicated on open and flexible learning spaces that facilitate the changing needs of the academic endeavour and changing pedagogies, e.g. inclusive, flipped and flexible learning. This is in contrast to the need to maintain stock integrity, which necessitates staffed access control at a single entry point. This has a consequential impact on the flow within and through library space and reduces our potential to truly co-locate alongside and within other university services and space.

Furthermore, there is an increasing requirement to provide library services in new and geographically dispersed environments either to meet university strategic initiatives, e.g. DLCs, or to respond rapidly to peaks in local demand, e.g. through pop-up libraries. There are significant cost benefits in considering open-library technology instead of or alongside staffed access control. For relatively low capital investment and nominal ongoing costs, the open-library concept has the potential to revolutionise library design and resolve the increasing demand for dispersed library services. This proof of concept is timely as we are at an early planning stage for reimagining our main library, and the DLP project provides us with an opportunity to test innovative approaches to the use of technology on a small scale in our physical spaces and the potential to influence future building design.

- 3 *Extend our basic core service offer without adding to staffing overhead costs*

At present our staffing budget for agency staff is fixed and the cost rises annually. We appreciate the importance of agency security staff in maintaining building and stock integrity. However, we see little evidence that this provides added value for our users, so the use of agency staff is not true value for money. In addition, due to the high proportion of a library's budget spent on

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staff, a staffed approach to a more agile way of operating is restricted. Our metrics for the success of our proof of concept at Telford will be in:

- stock being available 24x7, 365 days a year, with no additional staffing costs
- no increase in loss of stock using this approach
- positive student feedback and an increase in NSS library scores in subjects being offered at our Telford Campus

The right road?

We appreciate that the aspirations are ambitious. Although the reception in public libraries has been somewhat controversial, we believe this is an evolutionary step. It's not what we are offering but how we are offering services that continues to evolve. As we move away from staff resource focused on transactional activity, we are enabled to develop more bespoke and agile services. In this way we concentrate our efforts and resources on maximising impact and value for users, which is the overriding strategic aim of an academic library.

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