

Birkbeck, University of London

Analysis of the Library's 24 Hour Opening Pilot

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Introduction

The library conducted a 24/7 hour opening trial for a period of 7 weeks, from the 29 April to the 16 June 2019, which is the main exam period for many Birkbeck students. The trial was initiated following a successful campaign organized by the Student Union. In the months preceding the trial, members of the library's team met up regularly with Nick Baker, president of the Student Union, and the trade unions to work out an implementation plan for the project that would be satisfactory to everyone, the College, the Library and the unions. It was agreed that staff working overnight would be library employees, rather than externally recruited security staff. The Library and the Student Union worked together to define a target to show to what extent the students made use of the library and to help us decide whether or not the pilot could be considered a success. This library usage target was set at a headcount of 25 students at any one time throughout the night. This figure was reached by looking at the results of a previous 24/7 opening trial that took place in 2006. Although we agreed to carry out headcounts throughout the night, we were also keen to obtain qualitative data on how the students were actually using the library and what the impact of using the library at night might be.

Staffing models

The most common model for staffing academic libraries overnight in the UK is to use security guards provided by an external company. The College is moving away from the model of outsourcing this type of work in general and it was felt we could staff the Library with Library staff, as this would add the benefit of extra assistance being available to students. It was agreed that the staff employed would be able to call on a security guard (an additional security staff was recruited for the pilot) when needed. We employed four part-time Library Assistants (covering two shifts Monday to Thursday and Friday to Sunday, 11.45pm to 8.30am). This model worked well and the Library was able to stay open overnight as advertised throughout the period.

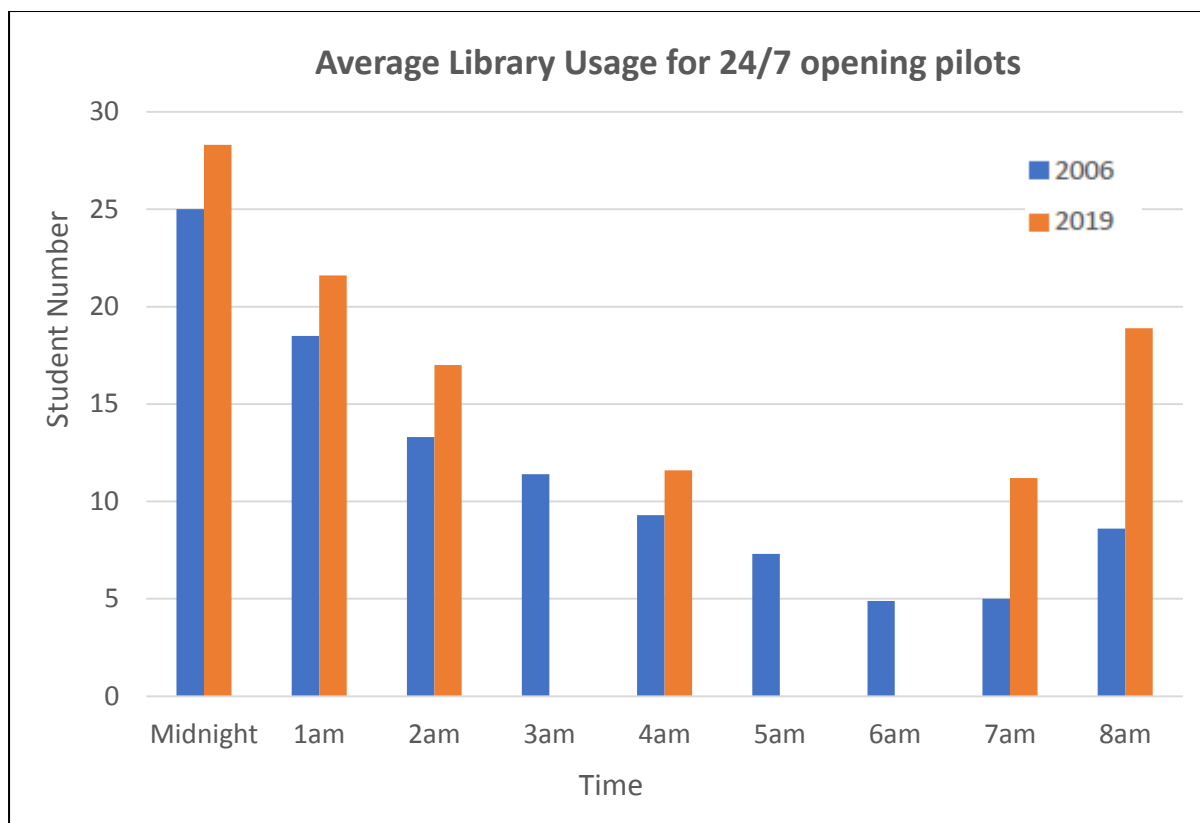
Service model

In contrast to common practice at other academic libraries, we decided that any user currently registered with Birkbeck Library would be welcome to use the Library at night, so this included visitors as well as current students and staff. The service remained the same as during the day, apart from the fact that students couldn't pay fines at the desk or top-up their print accounts with cash. Other ways of doing these things were advertised well in advance. We also decided not to accept new visitors during the overnight period.

Student usage

Headcounts and user statistics

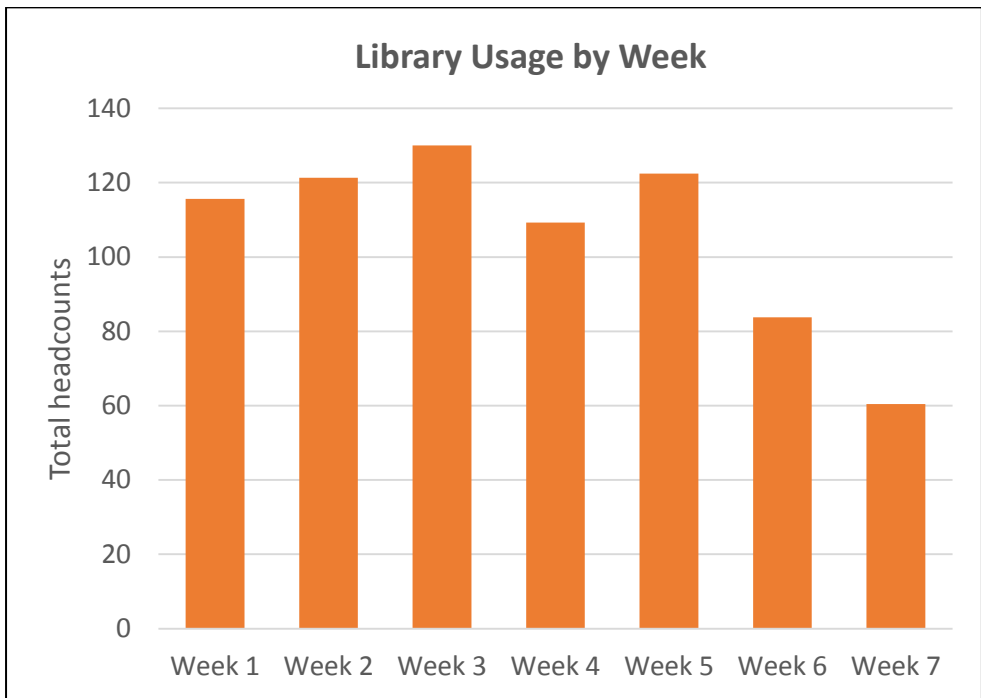
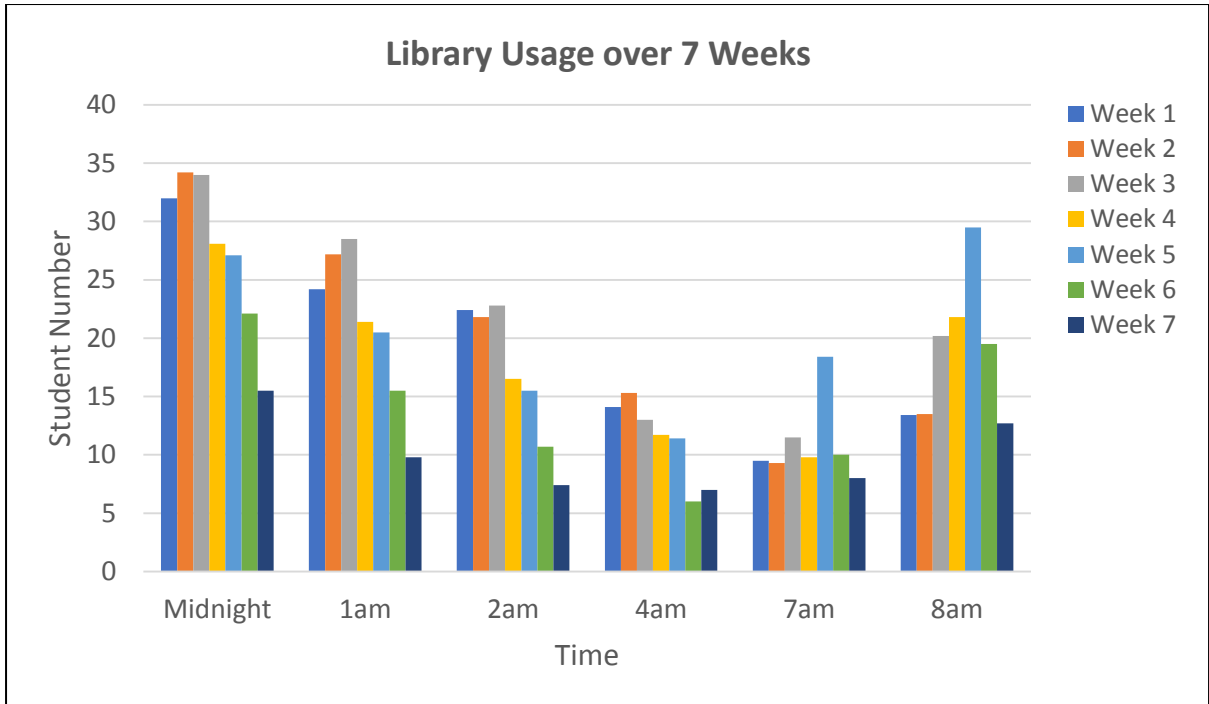
Looking at average headcounts at various times of the night, it is clear that the Library was better used this time than in 2006 as shown below:



However, the graph also shows that the target figure of 25 students was only reached at midnight overall, although the Library stayed fairly busy until 1am (21.6 students).

It is also useful to look at a breakdown of usage per week:

Time	Week 1 29/4-5/5	Week 2 6/5-12/5	Week 3 13/5-19/5	Week 4 20/5-26/5	Week 5 25/5-2/6	Week 6 3/6-9/5	Week 7 10/6-16/6	Total
Midnight	32	34.2	34	28.1	27.1	22.1	15.5	193
1am	24.2	27.2	28.5	21.4	20.5	15.5	9.8	147.1
2am	22.4	21.8	22.8	16.5	15.5	10.7	7.4	117.1
4am	14.1	15.3	13	11.7	11.4	6	7	78.5
7am	9.5	9.3	11.5	9.8	18.4	10	8	76.5
8am	13.4	13.5	20.2	21.8	29.5	19.5	12.7	130.6
Total	115.6	121.3	130	109.3	122.4	83.8	60.4	



This highlights important variations from week to week, in particular in the usage by students of the library in the mornings, when weeks 3 to 6 were a lot busier. It is the period when there were exams taken by large cohorts of students (for instance, computer science and law in Week 5). Week 3 (13-19 May) was the busiest overall. Weeks 1 to 3 were busier from midnight to 2am, with averages above 25 students using the Library at 1am in weeks 2 and 3.

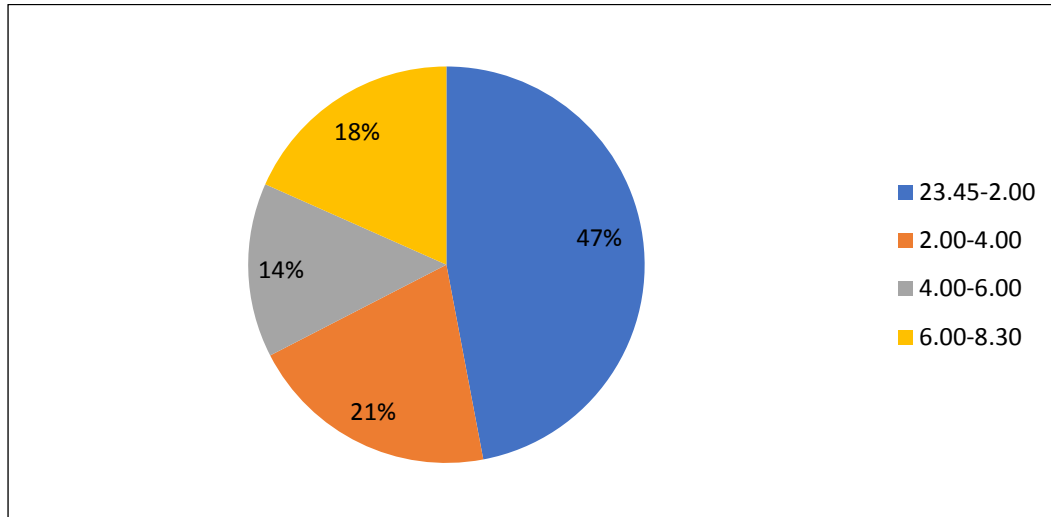
The busiest day in terms of entries to the Library was 30 May. It is not straightforward to retrieve the number individual users for the period from our Library Management System, but we can get entry figures more easily. We looked at 30 May as an example of a busy night and found out that 106 students used the library between midnight and 8.30am on that day.

The above graph also clearly shows that the last two weeks were significantly quieter overall.

An analysis of the number of gate entries to the Library during that period reveals that 85% of these were Birkbeck students (56% undergraduates and 29% postgraduates) and 15% were visitors. The number of staff (excluding library staff) entering the Library overnight is negligible. 24 % of UG students and 15.5% of PG students using the library overnight were registered with the Disability service.

Enquiries

We recorded the number of enquiries received at the desk by time slots. The table below confirms the results obtained from the headcount figures, showing that overall the service was at its busiest between midnight and 2am. In total 436 enquiries were recorded during the pilot.



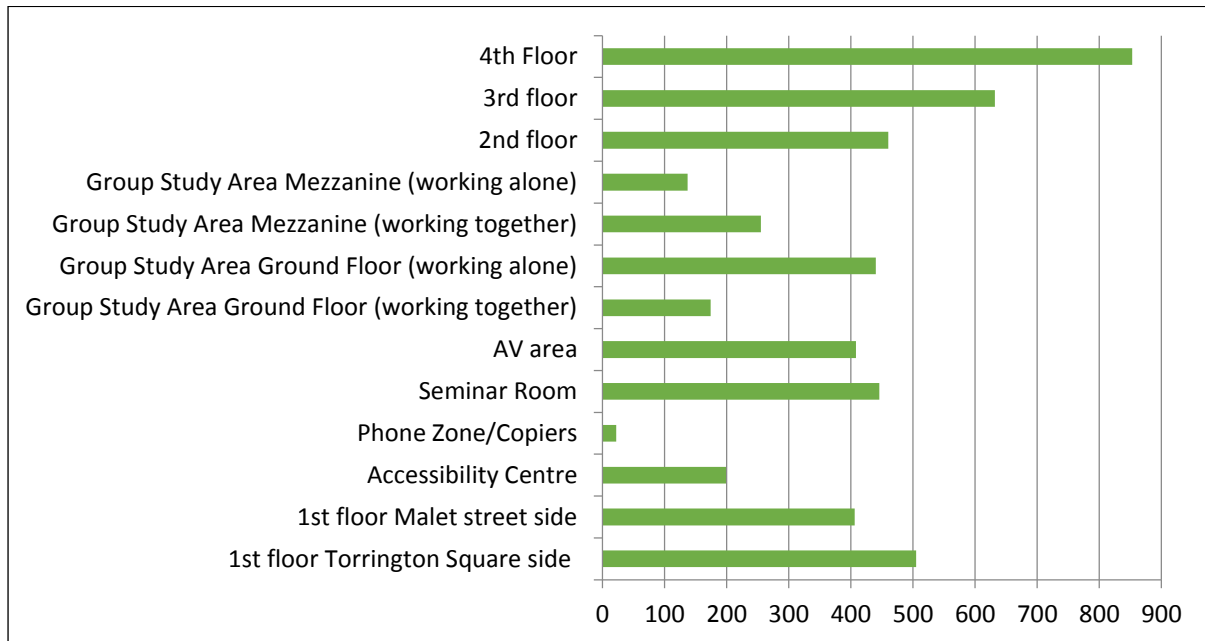
Number of enquiries by time slots

How students used the Library overnight

Areas used by students

The detailed headcounts carried out throughout the night by Library staff reveal which areas of the Library were used the most by students. The 4th floor was the most popular area, and the 3rd floor was also well used.

Although the Group study area was fairly well-used, it is interesting to see that many students were using the space to work on their own. The mezzanine was more popular to work in groups.

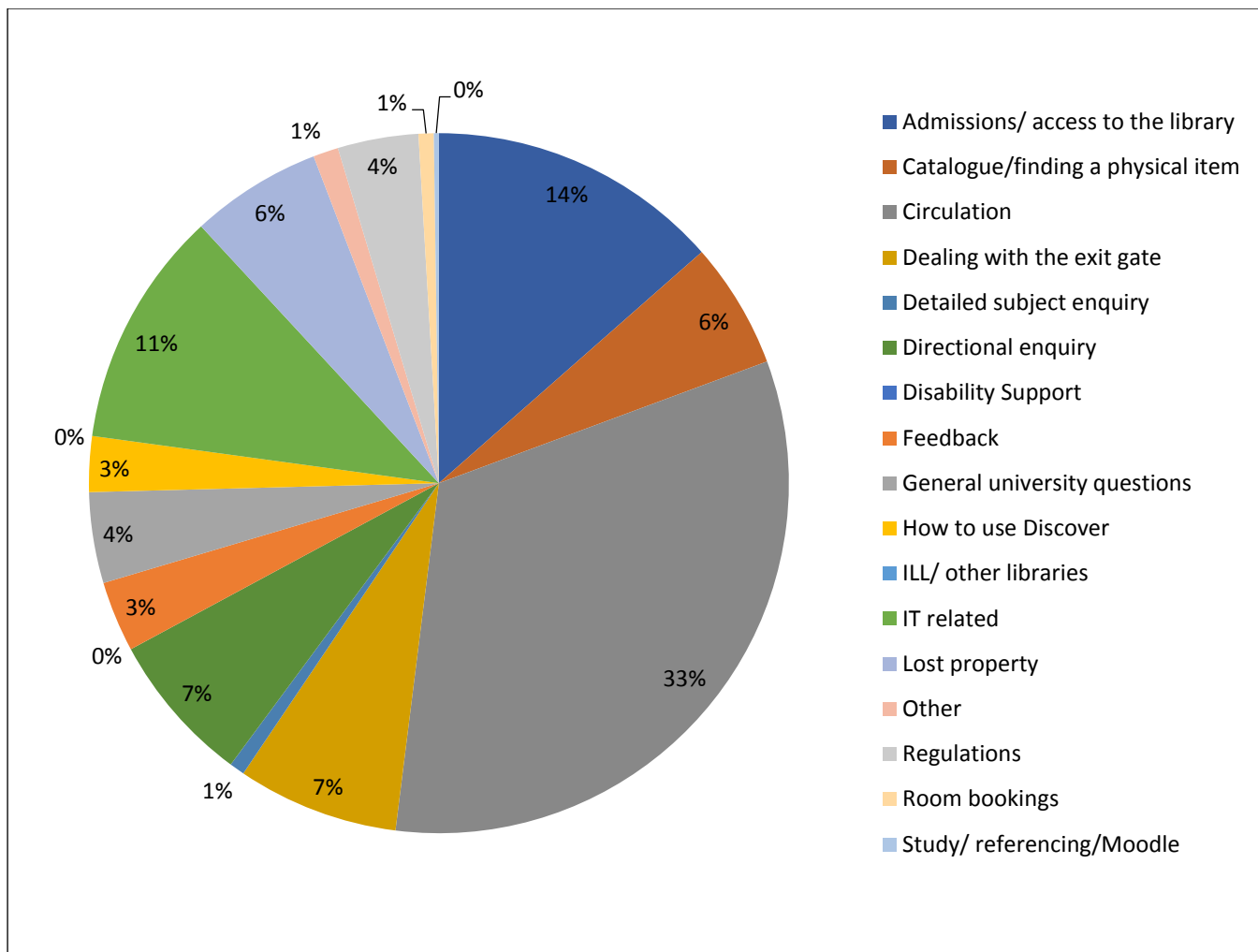


Total number of headcounts per area over 7 weeks

Enquiries and book issues

Having trained library staff during the pilot meant that students were able to continue using the Library as normal, as shown by the number of enquiries recorded. Out of the 436 enquiries that were received, 33% were related to circulation issues (student library account, returning, renewing or issuing books); 14% related to access to the library (as we didn't have any external visitor joining overnight, these are likely to be mostly around students having left their cards in the library or needing to print a day pass if they had left their ID card at home); 11% were about IT problems, including printing. This level of enquiries seems to indicate the usefulness of having trained staff at the desk, as opposed to offering a self-service model.

Overall the number of book issues was very low (only 56 items were issued overnight throughout the whole period), but students seem to have needed staff help in relation to their library accounts generally. In addition, the survey results indicate that a few students were using books in the library, without borrowing them, which shows that there was a need to use library material.

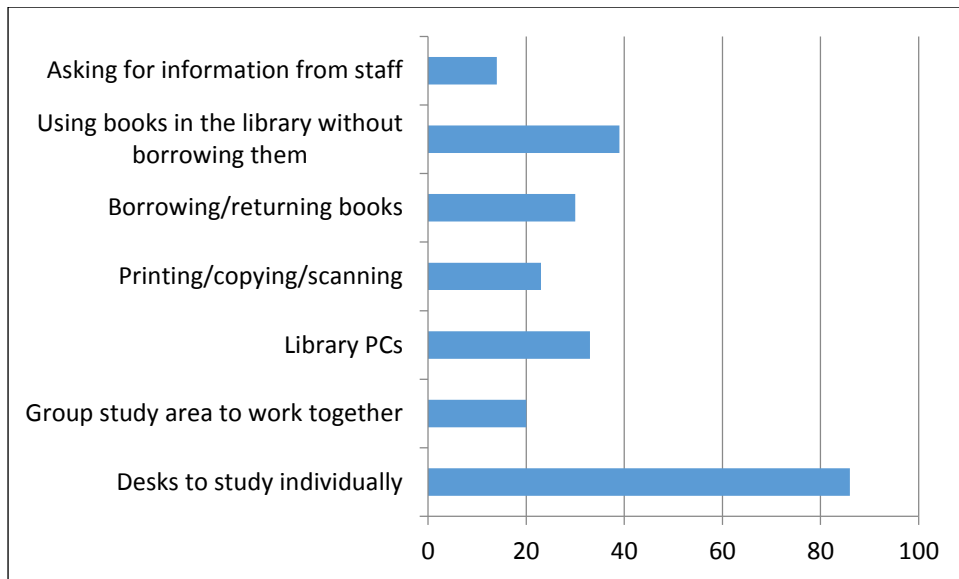


Overview of types of enquiries received

Survey and feedback

The Library designed a survey in collaboration with the Student Union to try and capture the reasons behind students using the Library during this period and the impact that it had on them and their wellbeing. 115 surveys were completed by students using the Library overnight. Although the survey only captures students who made the decision to make use of the 24/7 pilot, it is worth noting that the responses are very positive.

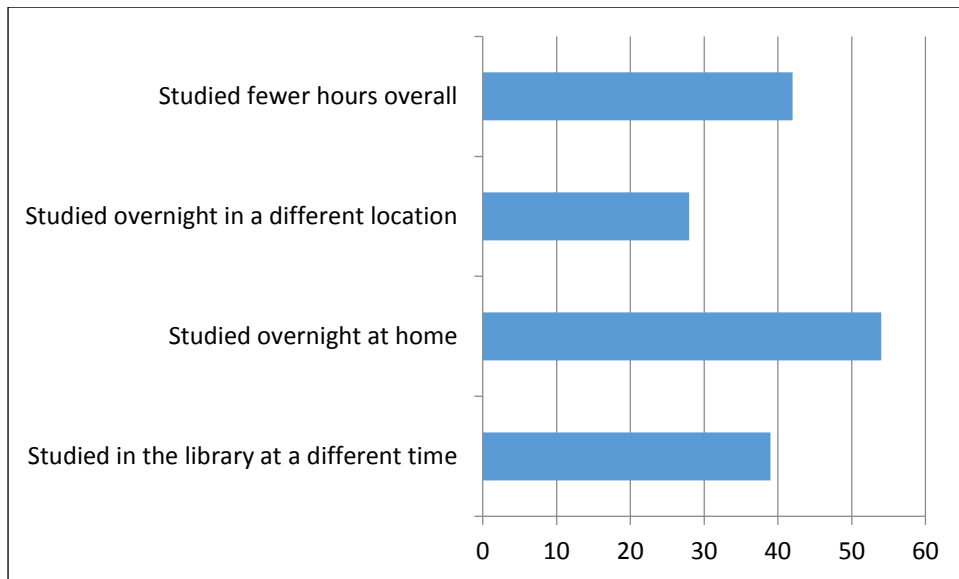
Students used various services when working in the Library overnight; 75% of them used desks to study individually; 34% said that they used books in the library and 28.5% of them used Library PCs; they also used printing and group study facilities, as well as asked staff for information.



Question 1: which services did you use in the Library today?

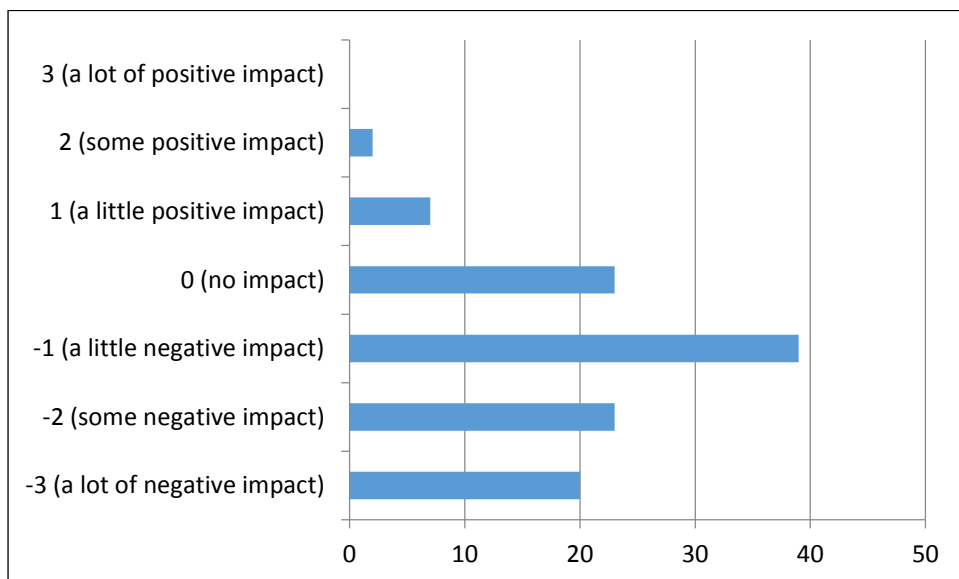
If the Library had not been open, many students told us that they would have studied at home (47%) or in a different location (24%). Although 36% of them also stated that they would have studied fewer hours, it looks as if many students chose the Library as a better place to study than other alternatives. This is reflected in the free comments collected as a follow up to this question. Several students said that they could not study at home; that the Library allowed them to have long uninterrupted study periods; with less distractions; some students chose to come in at night as the library was quieter then than during the day. Below is a sample of many positive comments received:

'I focus many times better in a library than at home. Also access to books on the shelves'; 'I'm less productive at home'; 'The books are here and it's more conducive to study'; 'I work during the day so having some time to rest then staying in the library overnight helps me spend more time for self-study and focus without worrying about opening hours'; 'Much easier to focus and has a lot of resources/infrastructure for studies'; 'It's a much better option than studying at home where I have no dedicated study room'; 'It is comfortable and relaxed to study. Resources available at any time. Not many places are being opened overnight'; 'The library is peaceful and friendly and warm, especially at night. Studying overnight at home is impossible in my particular living circumstances, as well as being an incubator of depression.'



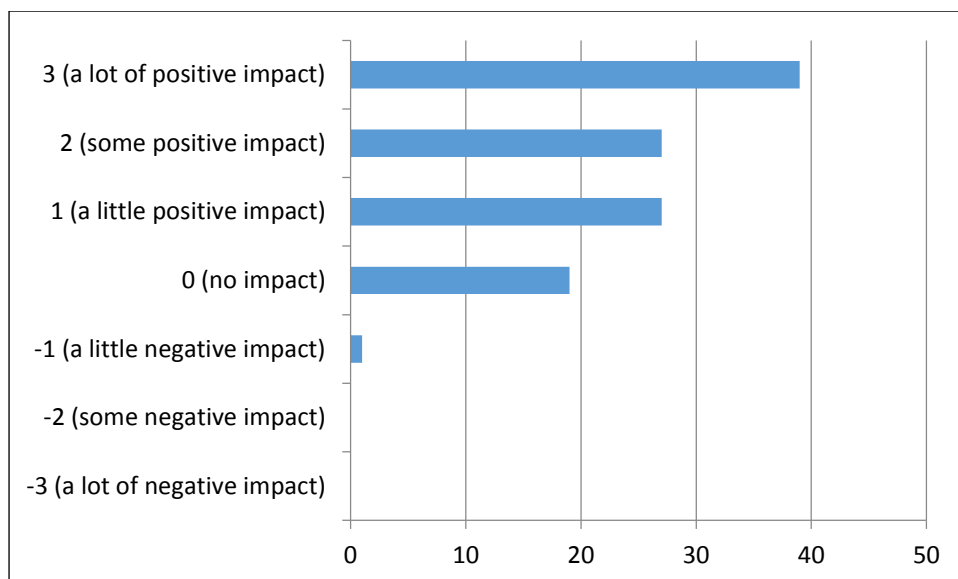
Question 2: if the Library had not been open overnight...

Asked what the impact of the exam period was on their mental health and wellbeing, the vast majority of students said that it had some negative impact, as shown by the chart below.



Question 4: to what extent does the exam period impact on your mental health and wellbeing?

However, when asked what impact the 24-hour opening had on their mental health and wellbeing, most students said that it had a little (23.9%), some (23.9%) or a lot (34.5%) of positive impact. Overall 82.3% of students thought that it had had some positive impact; 16.8% said that it had no impact, with only one student mentioning some negative impact.



Question 5: to what extent has Library 24 opening impacted on your mental health and wellbeing

Similarly the impact the pilot had on their ability to continue studying at Birkbeck and their chances of academic success was deemed very positive. Finally the impact on students' overall University experience was solely positive.

This point of view is reinforced by some of the free comments collected in the survey, where the 24/7 opening of the Library is seen as something very positive for Birkbeck:

'It is the best innovation Birkbeck has had during my time at the college'; 'Should be open for 24 hours throughout the year. Ranking will go up'; 'Actually I was thinking to change the university due to library time but now after opening 24h I changed my mind'; 'I am on last year of undergraduate studies..... If BBK keeps its library 24hrs then I will do my masters here and so will 8 of my friends; However if the 24hr facility goes then I won't stay for my masters in BBK and end up going to a university which is higher ranked and has 24hr library'.

Students describe the pilot as a 'fantastic initiative', 'great initiative'; they said that 'it had been amazing' and that they 'loved the ability to study at any time of night, it's really useful, I hope you continue it'. A student posted the following comment on Twitter 'Utilized the 24 hour library service for the first time last night. Thank you so much to all the @BirkbeckLibrary staff, security staff, and Costa staff for making it possible. You are heroes of the night'.

We collected feedback outside the survey, via email, our printed feedback form, the exam feedback board and in person. There were some concerns expressed by students, Library staff and colleagues in other departments, such as the Wellbeing service before the start of the pilot. A student expressed their surprise at seeing the College going ahead with the experiment which they described as 'lunacy'. Others were concerned about the loss of students' work/life balance and feared that it would have a negative impact on students' productivity, health and wellbeing.

On the whole, colleagues, staff and students seemed reassured by the approach taken by the Library and the Student Union who both promoted the importance of the need to rest, to sleep and take breaks rather than encourage all students to come in regardless of their individual needs and circumstances. It was an extremely positive experience to work with the Counselling Service Manager on this project.

Staff and student welfare

Concerns about student welfare were present throughout the pilot, but no incidents were reported by Library staff. When they had concerns about an individual student, they talked to the student, as well as let senior managers know. Some regular overnight library users got to know Library staff and felt supported by staff. One of them told me 'I like going down to the desk to talk to your staff when I need a break. We keep each other awake'.

On the whole, there were few incidents of students not respecting the library regulations. This is possibly because of the regular presence of security staff patrolling the library, as well as the fact that students were reasonable in taking regular breaks. Some made use of the café which was open for the first few weeks of the pilot; others were seen collecting pizzas from a delivery company and eating them outside the library on the ground floor.

Only one out of the four Library Assistants employed had previous experience of overnight work. The Library had met with the College's Health and Safety officer to discuss the potential problems linked with night work. As their line manager, I spent time with the staff before they started to discuss what could happen, encouraging them to let me know of any signs that could mean that they were not coping with night work.

The staff coped extremely well with the situation, making sure that they changed their sleeping pattern throughout the period (and not just for their shifts). What they found the hardest was to work in the presence of mice (see section below) and to witness one incident outside the Library whereby people had come off the street in a bad state and an ambulance had to be called.

Costings

The total cost of the project was £24,034 (1 CIS officer; 4 part-time library staff on Grade 3 (sp13), including additional hours for training, bank holidays, leave and sickness cover; additional cleaning). There was an additional cost to Estates (electricity) which they estimate to be a few thousand pounds.

In addition, we need to include Library staff time for the recruitment of the Library Assistants (330 applications were received and 15 candidates were shortlisted) and the crossover time spent by members of the Evening and Weekend team, and two of the senior managers to help the new staff settle in. The latter changed their working patterns slightly during this period, coming in and finishing earlier – which had a small impact on the daytime service.

Issues arising from the 24/7 pilot

Although there were mentions of the temperature of the Library dropping at night, and the Library being cold, the one single problem highlighted by both Library staff and students was the presence of mice. This is a concern for future, if the College was looking at keeping the Library open overnight, as there does not appear to be a solution. Estates said that the Pest Control team could not carry out the work that they normally do at night, which explained the recrudescence of this problem. It also meant that mice 'lost their bearings', not being able to make the difference between day and night, and were seen a lot more frequently in the library during the day. We received many complaints from students during this period, with some saying that 'they were leaving the Library because of rats'; others reporting that 'a mice had climbed up their foot' and one going as far as saying that Birkbeck should 'shut down' to eradicate the problem.

It is also worth mentioning that ITS and Estates needed to carry out work at night during that period (e.g. system upgrade; door replacement), which had some impact on the service.

Conclusion

As shown by the headcount figures, student usage did not reach the target figure of 25 students in the Library, agreed before the trial. In fact, considering that 15% of people using the library at that time were visitors, the figures for Birkbeck students making use of the Library at night are lower than indicated in the first section.

However the analysis of the data collected highlights that the overnight opening of the Library genuinely helped the students who made use of it. The Library space felt safe and secure to those who used it, thanks to the presence of dedicated library staff and security staff who cared for the students who were there. The impact on students was overall positive for their studies, as well as for their wellbeing and mental health. It also seems to have contributed to the current students who made use of the pilot, as well as some prospective students whom we talked to at the June Open Evening having a more positive view of Birkbeck as a place to study.

The fact that the usage figures declined quite considerably in the last two weeks seem to suggest that the main usage came from students preparing for exams, and that therefore there might not be a demand for 24/7 outside exam periods. However the fact that most students don't have to attend classes in June could also explain the low usage figures for that month. If a similar trial happened during the autumn or spring terms, the figures might be higher, even outside exams.

As the College is looking at changing its examination model, the idea of opening the Library during 'the main exam period' might no longer be relevant in future.