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Laptop loans in UCD Library

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This article describes the introduction of a new laptop loan service in University College Dublin's Health Sciences Library.

INTRODUCTION

UCD Library is made up of five site libraries. These are the (main) James Joyce Library, supporting the majority of the 22,000 UCD staff and students, and four smaller, more specialised libraries. One of these is the new Health Sciences Library, which opened in January 2007. The new Health Sciences Library is a state of the art learning resource centre, with an ethos focusing on student learning. The library is located in the heart of the new Health Sciences Centre, supporting medicine, diagnostic imaging, nursing, midwifery, physiotherapy, public health and sports studies. The library was designed in a way that would reflect the shift in higher education toward student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, such as collaborative projects, enquiry- and problem-based learning and small-group teaching.

This focus means that less physical space is dedicated to collections and more is dedicated to student study. Student study space consists of a combination of traditional individual desks, collaborative group-study rooms and soft seating and low tables. The building is wireless and every study desk is fitted with data and network points. There is one student IT lab located in the library. However this lab contains only 20 PCs and the library supports approximately 2,800 health sciences students.

With all of these factors in mind, it was decided to introduce a laptop loans service, starting in April 2007. The service would enable students to engage with our online library, work on their assignments while in the library (rather than leave to use a PC in an IT lab) and have flexibility in where and how they use electronic resources within the library space. The new service was planned and implemented by UCD Library's IT department and Health Sciences Library staff and was introduced on a pilot basis with a view to expansion of the service across other UCD Libraries if it was successful.

Before the service could be introduced, the most appropriate make and model of laptop had to be considered and chosen. In addition, each of the laptops had to be formatted, policies and procedures for the service had to be decided and staff had to be fully trained.

CHOOSING AND FORMATTING THE LAPTOPS

A number of laptops were considered for inclusion in the student laptop loan service. With a large number of students using the laptops it is essential that breakdowns and servicing are kept to a minimum. Therefore, due to the fact that they are durable and robust, and provide an excellent user service at a reasonable cost, the decision was made to use the Dell Latitude D520.

The chosen operating system (OS) is Windows XP Professional (Service Pack 2). All unnecessary applications and components, such as games, were removed from the OS. Due to the high turnover of laptop use it was essential to ensure that the computers are secure and that users are unable to change the appearance of the desktop, reconfigure the system settings and possibly introduce spyware, viruses or other harmful programs. Furthermore, shared computers often use shared accounts where internet history, online documents and cached web pages are available from one person to the next. Because of this, each laptop has two accounts: an administrator account and a limited student account. The administrator account is only accessible to library's IT staff. The limited student account consists of a number of inherent security features, such as prohibiting programs from being installed on the laptop and the making of major changes to the system settings. This was achieved through the use of the Microsoft Shared Computer Toolkit. The Microsoft Shared Computer Toolkit for Windows XP provides a simple and effective way to defend the shared computers. Basically, the Toolkit protects

the Windows partition (C: drive) that contains the Windows operating system and other programs from being permanently modified during a user session. Disk changes are cleared with each restart unless an administrator chooses to save them.

The laptops provide students with access to a number of applications, including EndNote, the Office 2003 Professional suite and Sophos antivirus. To enable students to print wirelessly, Novell iPrint has been installed to give access to a large number of printers situated in the library. Along with the standard Windows applications, accessibility options were also incorporated; these include ZoomText 8.1 and TextHelp Read and Write Gold 7.



The Midi Mentor storage and recharging cabinet is used to store the laptops. This ensures that laptops are continuously available for student use and are always charged, secure and transportable. It allows the simultaneous storage and recharging of up to 15 laptops at any one time. This system is beneficial in that it is not necessary to supply students with power leads when laptops were borrowed. The battery life of the laptops is approximately three hours. After that time students have the option of returning the laptop or borrowing another laptop, if available.

IMPLEMENTING THE SERVICE

It was felt that the laptop loan service would be a popular and valued one. This meant it was important to deliver the service in an effective and customer-friendly manner. This was a crucial factor in deciding where the laptop loan service should be located in the library. Services in the Health Sciences Library are split between two floors. Borrowing is carried out at the loans desk on the ground floor and other services, such as subject reference, are carried out from the information desk on the first floor. Although all other borrowing takes place at the loans desk, it was decided to run the laptop loans service from the information desk. This was done for two main reasons.

First, the loans desk is located at the entrance of the library, which is often a very busy area. Staff at this desk deal not only with borrowing queries but also with queries regarding access. When laptops are borrowed it is important that staff have time to explain the service rules and regulations and ensure that students understand the conditions of use. Furthermore, when they are returned it is important that staff have time to examine the laptops in order to ensure they haven't been damaged before being accepted. While an error in borrowing or returning a book has a relatively benign implication for the library, a similar error when a laptop is borrowed or returned could have considerably expensive implications.

The second reason for locating this service at the information desk was its location. With the exception of current journal issues, all of the collections are based on the first floor. As well as this, the vast majority of study spaces in the library are based on the first and second floors. Running the service from the information desk meant it was closer to the areas where students were using the laptops and at their 'point of need'.

In principle, the process for borrowing a laptop should be as simple as borrowing a book. However, the cost of loss or damage to a laptop is significantly greater than that of a book and for that reason it was decided that anyone borrowing a laptop must be in possession of a valid UCD student or staff identity card. In addition, to avoid patterns of bad borrowing behaviour, if students have any outstanding charges or overdue loans on their accounts they are not able to borrow a laptop until fines are paid and books are returned or renewed.

The laptop loan service is restricted to the confines of the library and students cannot remove a laptop from the library under any circumstances. Every student borrowing a laptop is requested to sign a form outlining the terms and conditions of use. This form states the return time of the laptop (usually after 3 hours) and the acceptable usage policy. Students are informed that they cannot save their work onto the hard drive but can save files to their allocated network space or a USB device. They are also given a mouse and network cable whether they require them or not. This prevents any confusion regarding what has been borrowed. Guides explaining how to save and print from the laptop are also handed out if needed.

Since the service was initially offered in a pilot phase, all the procedures and regulations were

subject to change if it was felt they could be more effective. Because it was a pilot, feedback from students was considered to be extremely important in the review process.

PREPARING THE STAFF

The introduction of the laptop loans service brought with it a significant impact on the staff working at the information desk. Prior to the launch of the service, many staff were relatively unfamiliar with laptops and had little experience of using them. Because of this, it was crucial to provide staff with the opportunity to become familiar and comfortable with handling and using them. Therefore, in preparation for the launch of the service, staff were provided with specific training. This consisted of a hands-on workshop delivered by the library's IT department.

An outreach staff-training programme was initiated which consisted of on-site demonstration of the system. The training contained three elements. The first was on the issuing and returning of the laptops. They are issued via a database that pulls borrower information from UCD's library management system. This meant that the process was already familiar to staff. Second, an overview of the information needed by students using the system was provided. This included information regarding wireless and wired access, how to print from the laptop and how to save when using the laptop. The third element was explaining the policies and procedures on acceptable use of the laptops and responsibility for any damages.

PROMOTING THE SERVICE

While it was predicted that this would be a very popular service, there was still a need to raise awareness and promote it to the library's user population. As mentioned, it was launched in April 2007, which was quite close to the end of teaching within UCD's academic year. Although it would have been advantageous to launch the service earlier in the year, this was not logistically possible. However, the service began at a time when students were frantically preparing for exams and completing assignments, which meant it was delivered at a time of need.

Three separate approaches were taken in promoting the service. First it was advertised on the library website. A page under the 'Services and facilities' section of the website was created, containing all the details of the new service. The service was also mentioned in the news section of the



UCD Library website, and on the UCD portal as well as health sciences subject pages. The second approach was to promote the service to academics in the hope that they would then mention the service to their students. E-mails were sent out to relevant mailing lists about the service, linking to information on the library website. In addition to promotion on the website and the e-mailing of relevant staff, the service was heavily promoted within the Health Sciences Library. Staff in the library's IT department created a poster advertising the service. These were posted in heavy traffic areas such as the entrance and exit, at service desks, at public computers and on stairways.

RESULTS OF THE PILOT

Feedback forms were handed out to every student when they borrowed a laptop for the first time. The form asked students to rate their experience of using this service as very good, good, average or poor and asked whether they would use the service again. The form also asked how students would like to see the service improved and included a few suggestions, such as increasing the hours of service and specific IT requirements.

Laptops were borrowed approximately 601 times during the pilot. Examination of the figures showed that students rarely borrowed a laptop once and a significant feature of the service was that it quickly generated repeat customers.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive: 96% of people who used the service said that it was either very good or good and 100% said they would use it again. Comments from students were also extremely encouraging and demonstrated that the original rationale for the service was very much in tune with how the students perceived

it. For example, the fact that students didn't need to leave the library to use a computer was mentioned: *'Great Idea – saves a lot of running in and out of the computer labs'; 'Fantastic idea – really useful to do assignment in the library instead of a noisy computer room.'*

Although there was no feedback that could be described as negative, there were several suggestions for enhancing the service: *'Increase the number of laptops!'; 'Laptops are brilliant quality and nice & compact – only fault I can find is the short battery life, a charger should be given out with the laptop.'*

One of the major themes to emerge from the feedback forms was about the service's hours. In the first instance, the service was only available while the information desk was open, which is 9:30am to 1:00pm and 2:00pm to 5:00pm. Within a week of commencing the service these hours were adjusted. A decision was made to allow students to return the laptop after 5:00pm. From 5:00pm all services are now based at the loans desk. Staff who work from 5:00pm to 10:00pm were trained so that laptops could be returned in the evenings. Furthermore, from September 2007, a full laptop loans service has been available from 9:30am to 10:00pm.

The most obvious result from the pilot was that supply often outstripped demand. Because of this a record was taken of every time a student came to borrow a laptop when there were none available. There were other less immediately obvious results. Although they weren't as apparent, they still had a significant impact.

Locating such a popular service at the information desk had an effect on the number of queries coming to that desk. Because the service was launched in the first year of the opening of the Health Sciences Library, there are no relevant statistics to compare with those for April 2007. However, the feeling among staff is that the laptop loan service has increased awareness of the information desk and the services it can provide.

Another impact of the service is that students are much more likely to remain in the library to work rather than borrow books and leave to work somewhere else. This is considered to be one of the most positive impacts the service has had. It means that the new library is being used by students in a holistic way, as was intended when it opened. For these students the library is much more than a place to borrow books – it is also

a space where they actively engage in learning, interacting with both the physical and the electronic resources in the library.

There have been other, more hidden benefits of the service. Students cannot borrow a laptop if they have overdue loans or outstanding charges on their account. The result of this has been that books are returned and fines are paid much more promptly.

Providing such a popular and well-received service in the library has also been an invaluable PR exercise. It has been extremely rewarding to receive a positive response from students. Communication with library users often focuses on the negatives, such as outstanding fines, the use of mobile phones and bringing food into the library. The laptop loans service, however, focuses on how the library can support students in a helpful and constructive way.

CONCLUSIONS – THE FUTURE OF THE SERVICE

A strong feature of the laptop loans service is the increased collaboration between departments within the library. There are nearly 200 people working in the UCD Library in various departments. With an organisation of that size it is easy to become fragmented by separate functions. The laptop loans service has two distinct elements – IT and service – which has resulted in the two departments working and cooperating closely on the pilot, reflected in the authorship of this article.

The introduction of the laptop loans service has been extremely successful. The experience in the Health Sciences Library and the information gathered from the feedback forms are currently being used to inform the expansion and development of the service.

From September 2007, in addition to the extended hours of service in the Health Sciences Library, laptop loans have become available in the (main) James Joyce Library. The introduction of this service in another library has resulted in further collaboration among three library departments and it is hoped that as the service is developed and expanded further the experience in the Health Sciences Library will result in further cooperation and in enhanced services for our users.