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The electronic information desk at Leeds Met



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The electronic information desk is the email enquiry service for the library at Leeds Metropolitan University and has now been in operation for five years. The service was set up following a review and redesign of both the library's provision for supporting students off-campus and of its web pages. The service started as a pilot project in September 2001 and it was decided after one semester to continue it on a permanent basis

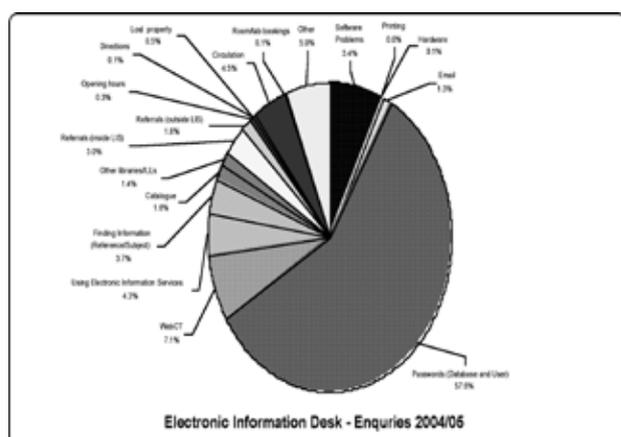
THE EVOLUTION OF THE SERVICE

Since the launch of the electronic information desk the service has undergone a gradual evolution. Users have always been able to submit enquiries using a web form or a dedicated email address, both accessible via the library's publicly available web pages. Initially the library was concerned about the possibility of not being able to handle the number of enquiries so the service was publicised as restricted to Leeds Met staff and students. Following the pilot phase it was clear that the staffing of the service was sufficient to meet the demand so this restriction was removed. It was also decided at the launch of the service that it would only deal with the types of enquiries that would be answered at the library's information desks with other enquiries, such as those relating to circulation matters, being forwarded to the library counter. The type and range of enquiries dealt with has gradually extended so that now the service will try and deal with any enquiries, only forwarding those where the input of other staff is required. This means that, for example, an emailed book renewal request would be dealt with but an enquiry concerning an invoice for a lost book would be forwarded to the counter services supervisor; or common solutions to a problem accessing

the student email would be suggested, but a continuing problem would be forwarded to the team that look after the student email system. If an answer cannot be given to an enquiry unrelated to library services, the enquirer is referred to a more appropriate person or service area. During the pilot of the service in September 2001 it was publicised that enquiries would receive an answer within two working days. This was soon reduced to a few hours and in 2004/05 the performance of the electronic information desk was incorporated into the library's official service standards. The standards for 2005/06 state that enquiries received between 08.30 and 16.30 Monday to Friday will receive an answer within three hours.

TYPES OF ENQUIRIES DEALT WITH

During its first year of operation in 2001/02 the electronic information desk dealt with 188 enquiries. In 2004/05 it answered 3165 enquiries, over half of which were received between October and January. The pie chart below breaks these down by category:



NOTES ON PIE CHART CATEGORIES

Passwords - user and database: user passwords can be reset and emailed to a secure address

Software problems - using office software, problems connecting to and accessing resources online

WebCT - using and accessing the university's virtual learning environment

Circulation - book renewals, holds, fines and library memberships

Using electronic information services - information databases and e-journals

Finding information - reference and subject based enquiries

Referrals (inside LIS) - referrals made inside Learning and Information Services (this comprises

our sister departments of Learning Technology Services and Computing Services).

STAFFING THE ELECTRONIC INFORMATION DESK

The three-hour turn-around time and the range of enquiries dealt with by the electronic information desk mean that the staffing of the service is very important. Although the service can be staffed from any PC, it is based in the Library European and Off-campus Services (LEOS) office. This office is the home for a number of outward facing services such as Offsite, the distance learner support service, and a European Information Centre. It is also the base for the library's telephone enquiry service which takes calls from the information desks between 10.00 and 16.30 and from the reception desk at one of the campus libraries from 10.30 am to 12.30 every weekday during term time. The LEOS office has three qualified library staff and one part-time assistant, but the electronic information desk uses a broad range of staff from across the library including assistants at all levels, IT assistants and other qualified library staff. These staff work hourly shifts between 10.30 and 13.30 every weekday dealing with both email enquiries and telephone calls. Outside of these core hours the LEOS staff deal with both the emails and telephone calls and during vacations have sole responsibility for dealing with email enquiries. This staffing model means that the electronic information desk is continuously staffed throughout the day with staff during core hours dedicated solely to dealing with enquiries.

STAFF TRAINING

In July 2004 the pool of staff dealing with enquiries to the electronic information desk and telephone enquiry service was widened to include library assistants and the range of enquiries extended to include circulation issues. Training using buddying was put in place. Pairs of staff were on duty together, one person with circulation experience and one with knowledge of passwords and electronic resources. These buddying relationships continued until both parties were happy to work on their own. Training for staff new to the service continues to use this model with a basic induction and the buddying of the person to be trained with an experienced member of staff for a number of hands on sessions. This technique has been very successful as it has allowed experienced staff to pass on their knowledge gradually and in an informal organic way. The staff being trained are not burdened

with a lot of information in a short space of time but are able to slowly build up their confidence and competence and they feel comfortable asking questions and revisiting areas. The LEOS staff are also always on hand to help out with advice and assistance and have a particular expertise regarding issues which arise off-campus.

pilot extending the service until 19.30 in term-time and 18.30 in the vacation, with the staff on evening duty at the information desk answering the enquiries. It is now proposed that both these extensions of the service be monitored against a draft service standard with a view to formally incorporating them into the standards for 2007/08.

MONITORING SERVICE QUALITY

An important element in making sure the electronic information desk provides a responsive, effective and efficient service is the fact that a response time of three hours for enquiries received between 08.30 and 16.30, Monday to Friday, is published formally as part of the library's service standards. A report is made annually on compliance with this standard and information on whether the standard has been met or not is also publicly available. Adherence to this service standard and the quality and accuracy of responses given by the electronic information desk is maintained in a number of ways. With the service being based in the LEOS office there are always staff available to monitor the progress of enquiries against the service standards and offer advice and assistance as required. Every term there is a more formal service monitoring exercise where for a specific week all enquiries are monitored against the service standards. During the spring term of 2006 the electronic information desk was also included in the library's mystery visiting programme. This involved eleven people from other libraries in Leeds submitting enquiries and commenting on their experience under a number of categories such as speed of answer, tone and professionalism of the reply, accuracy of information given and overall impression of the service. They also graded each category as either commendable, satisfactory or unsatisfactory. This proved a valuable exercise which generated some interesting feedback and nearly all the mystery visitors rated the service as commendable across all the criteria used.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

As indicated in the brief history of the electronic information desk at the start of this article, the service has undergone a continual evolution over the last five years and during the last eighteen months there have also been more developments. Since February 2005 there has been a pilot project extending the electronic information desk to weekends with weekend information desk and reception staff answering the enquiries. Between April and June 2006 there was also a successful