

Planning Ahead, Being Prepared: Looking into Future Possibilities for Library Space

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PLANNING AHEAD, BEING PREPARED: LOOKING INTO FUTURE POSSIBILITIES FOR LIBRARY SPACE

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Abstract

OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University (former Oslo and Akershus University College) is a new university, situated in the city center of Oslo, with 20.000 students. Four libraries support research and education at their local campuses, 3 of them situated within a 5 minutes walking distance. The university is growing and the need for working space for the students are increasing. There are various plans to expand the university library, from just revitalize the existing library space, extending the existing premises or merging the three campus libraries and move to new premises. We want to plan ahead of those changes and be prepared for different scenarios.

In this paper, we will describe the continuing process of rethinking and redesigning existing library space in a time of big and sometimes unpredictable changes. User centered design methods (UX) will be used for getting information about the use of the premises and the needs and wishes of our students. A new method for visual seat sweeps combined with user surveys will give us better understanding of how and where our users prefer to study. The program Rapal Optimaze will give us visual maps showing the use of seating and the impact of use in different zones in the main library P48. In the same period, we are also recording questions at the circulation desks. All these methods will give us valuable UX variables to consider when planning ahead. The results will be presented together with different scenarios for utilizing the library space for the benefit of our users.

Keywords: Academic libraries; Library space; Library redesign; Tracking the traffic; Visual traffic sweeps; Survey; Circulation desk

Introduction

When the main library (P48) at OsloMet - Oslo Metropolitan University, moved into existing premises in 2007, there was not much time for planning. The focus was on the book collection and group study rooms on the first floor. The ground floor had a learning center approach with computer stations and reading space. The premises was previous office space and not ideal for library use. The primary library users are mainly the students. Faculty and PhD. students have their own offices, and do not use the library as study space. The change in learning styles and more emphasis on electronic collections made us start looking at the library services with fresh eyes. In 2012, we started a project with focus on both collections, services and premises. Since then we have done several traffic sweeps. Because of these surveys, we have refurbished the library from being a major book collection to a space for study. We are now in the process of planning for the University Library of the 2020's. In this paper, we will describe how we prepare for the future.

The focus for this study has been the main library (P48) at OsloMet. All the four libraries (P32, P35, P48 and Kjeller) are included in one of the studies (questions at the circulation desk).

Background

Do we know what our students' preferences are regarding library services? In an article from 2018 the authors described the perception gap between what people (librarians) believes something to be and how it actually is (Young & Kelly, 2018). In our library, we are trying to reduce this gap by using different methods in user studies: tracking the traffic, analyzing the questions at the circulation desk and minor questionnaires.

This project started out with the purpose of making the library the preferred place to study. Our main goal is to make the library the heart of campus. This is described in the article "Making the library the preferred place to study" (Gregersen & Moxnes, 2017).

In 2012, we started mapping the library area, equipment, functions and services. We also performed a traffic sweep. This gave us valuable information when planning for extended working space for the students. In addition to facilitate for more working space for the students, we wanted to give the library a warmer and more welcoming environment. Plans for the use of colors, materials and furniture has been very useful. Better lighting and soundproofing is also important. Making plans for different working zones, such as group study space, single reading space and flexible space has been one of our most important objectives. Drawing the different space into a map of the library floors was very useful. The library should cater for different learning styles. We have created group study spaces, single spaces and flexible spaces. We have found it useful to look at McDonalds key qualities for good learning space (McDonald, 2006). The need to adjust our plans and the prioritized list is sometimes necessary. Tracking the traffic and observations make us agile for different needs and changes.

Methods

Visual traffic sweeps

Learning space play a major role in the students' outcome of their learning activities (Beckers, van der Voordt, & Dewulf, 2016). In order to learn more about our students learning styles we have been performing traffic-sweeps in 2012, 2016 and 2018. We used methods described by Høivik (2014) and Given and Leckie (2003). The method was paper-based and the focus was on how the students are working. Data on how many students were working in groups, alone, with library PC's, private laptops, in quiet reading spaces or common learning areas was counted and the data was registered in spreadsheets (Excel).

After having redesigned and bought new furniture we wanted to know how these working areas are utilized. We wanted to have a visual idea of the library's working spaces and to make new improvements based on the students' preferred places to work.

In their article "Visual traffic sweeps" Given and Archibal (2015) inspired us to look for a similar program for making visual traffic sweeps. The OsloMet University's official furniture agent turned out to have just the right program. Optimaze is a space utilization measurement tool developed for measuring space utility in companies, schools and other organizations. The measurements help us to understand the work patterns and the space requirements of our users. We can also determine the success or failure of previous redesign of library space (Patjas, 2019).

Preparations for the study included a map of the library premises with all the different workplaces and seating clearly marked. The need for accurate number of seating was a challenge, as the students tend to move the furniture around. With a little effort, we managed to organize the group study rooms with 6 seating each, the common tables for groups between 8-14 seats, all the single study tables etc.

The library space map and the number of seating was uploaded to the program. We used a tablet to register the counts twice a day for two weeks during the library's staffed opening hours. Each occupied seat in the single workspace was marked. In group study rooms and other group

spaces, we registered the number of persons occupying a room. We performed the visual traffic sweeps twice a day, two weeks in May.

We defined the library space as 6 different workstations:

1. Workstation (open) = single seating for individual study in open area
2. Workstation (Semi-open) = single seating for individual study
3. Workstation (focus) = quiet reading rooms or spaces
4. Workstation (team room) = group study rooms for 6-8 persons, group tables
5. Workstation (computer station) = library computer work stations
6. Social and catering seat = sofas and soft chairs

The results of the walkthroughs are displayed as visual maps of the library with colored dots on the seats showing the utilization rate for each seat.

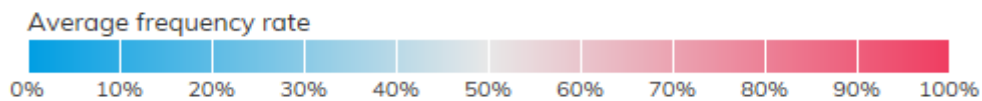


Fig. 1. Color code for utilization and frequency rate

Displaying results

The results are displayed on the map by filtering the defined space. This were combined with utilization rate or frequency rate which were calculated by “Average”, “Daily peak average” or “peak”

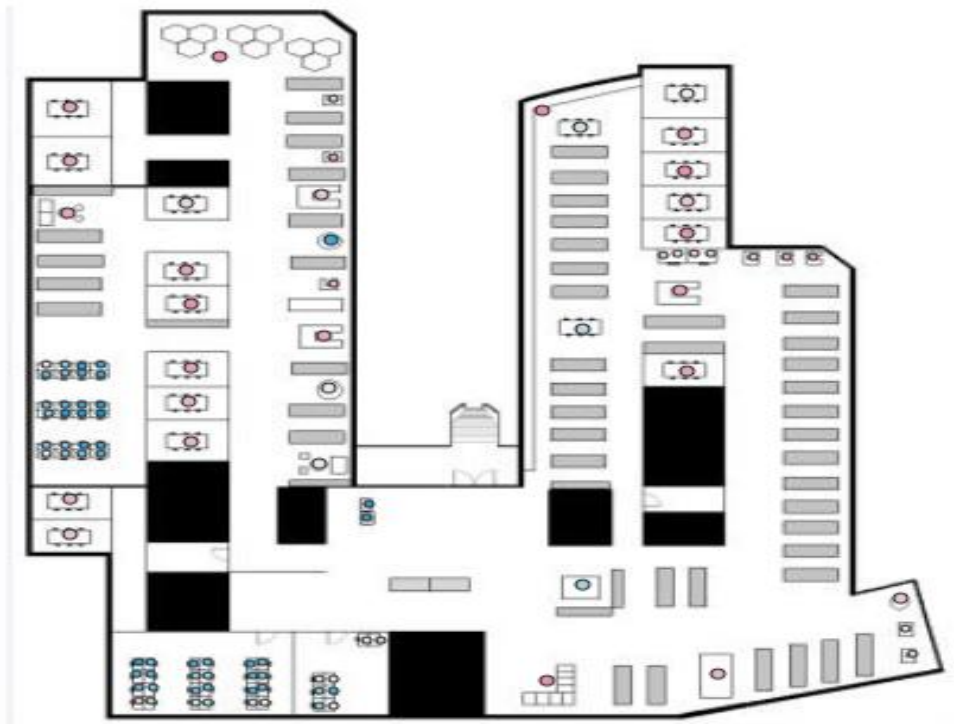


Fig. 2. Map of the library, 2nd floor

The results can also be displayed in bar graphs or pie charts. All the results can easily be transferred to Excel.

Findings

The visual traffic sweeps give us a good picture of which seats are heavily occupied and which are not. We can tell that students like to have a bit of space between themselves as the most occupied seats often are the first and last in a row.

The group study room is highly utilized, throughout the year. These rooms are a scarcity factor. However, we found that one person used some of the group study rooms only. This is not the intention and more explicit rules for use of the group study rooms is needed.

The open workspaces in the library are popular. Both our new group and single pod seating and a long desk by the window is popular. The flexible group study spaces are heavily used. The students create their own room in the room with flexible walls and flexible furniture. These spaces are also used for the Learning Support Centre on the 1. Floor, and for different events and training sessions on the ground floor, making the use of these premises highly effective.

The use of the silent reading room was low, even in an exam period. The library has always been an active zone, but over the last few years, we see that the students are making their own rules for behavior in the library. They want a quiet library where they can study alone among others in premises that inspire academic work.

Today we have 93 computers in the library, which is more than enough considering that the students must own their own laptops. The computers on the ground floor is highly utilized because of the proximity to the IT support service. The use of the computers in the 24-hour room is very low and plans are already made to turn this area into group study spaces.

The soft seating by the journals is hardly not in use. Plans for utilizing this area is needed.

Questions at the circulation desk

As experienced librarians, we know that students appreciate to have someone to interact with outside the classrooms. Librarians are well informed about demands put on students in their academic work. We work in close contact with the faculty in creating reading lists and information literacy courses. The university library is open and welcoming with easy access to guidance at their reference- and circulation desks.

The circulation desk plays a major part in that respect. Our circulation desk handles all kinds of questions from our users. The desks are serviced by qualified librarians from 08:00 am – 15:30 pm, and by library science students from 15:30 pm – 18:30 pm. We also have a special reference desk serviced twice a week for 2 hours (more hours during exams) and which deals with more complicated questions that needs more time than we normally can offer in the circulation desk, like literature searches, APA referencing and EndNote problems.

This semester we have been surveying the questions at the circulation desk in 3 different weeks. A chart with 12 categories was drawn up and the personnel at the desk should map the different questions asked during their shift. A master student did the first survey and made the questions. The questions are based on similar surveys in other Norwegian libraries. (Kilvik & Lamøy, 2018). We found this so interesting we decided to continue the survey and we were allowed to use the same questions. The questions are:

1. Borrow/return/ILL (when contacting the circulation desk)
2. Help and info about renewing, fines, library procedures
3. Finding specific titles, known-item searches, simple searches in Primo
4. How to find specific collections, locating books on the shelf
5. Finding the way in the building

6. Help with printing/scanning/copying, 3Dprinting and other equipment
7. Using programs like EndNote, Zotero, Word, Leganto, Canvas
8. Academic writing and referencing
9. Reading tips and reading advices from the librarian. Advanced searching the databases
10. Info on the library's courses, services at the reference desk, the Learning Support Centre
11. Borrowing office supplies and equipment, lost and found
12. Miscellaneous

All the staff working in the circulation desks in the four libraries participated in doing the survey. These kind of surveys can be described as research diaries defined as "a record of ever-changing present ...When external events and occurrences are captured from the perspective of an individual or individuals over time" (Sheble, Thomson, & Wildemuth, 2017, p. 228).

We must consider that the questions asked as well as the different categories can be interpreted differently from person to person. Thus, these surveys can be described as semi-structured research diary based on an event-contingent study design where the participants are asked to make an entry whenever a particular type of event occurs (Sheble et al., 2017, p. 229). Research diaries can capture ordinary events that might seem insignificant to the observer. Thus, keeping a record of the everyday life at the circulation desk gives us a good picture of what is going on, how often different situations occurs etc. The records are close in time of the occurrence. The survey was done during 3 specific weeks during term: in December, January and April, to see if there are significant differences in the use of the library during the study year.

When analyzing the data, we gathered the questions in 6 groups, distributed among the 4 libraries:

1. Borrowing (1 and 2)
2. Collection and access (3 and 4)
3. Programs (7)
4. Guidance (8 and 9)
5. Practical (5, 6 and 10)
6. Miscellaneous (11 and 12)

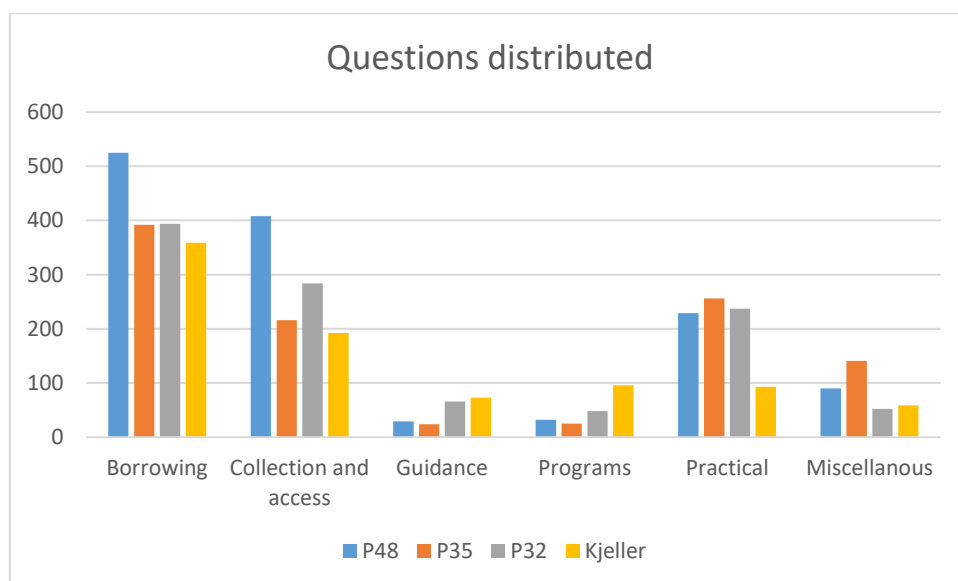


Fig. 3. Questions at the circulations desks of all the libraries

The traditional “library questions” like how to borrow or renew a loan, where to find books on the shelves or getting access to full text materials are in majority. It is natural that guidance, maybe the most accomplished questions, are in minority. This is because all the libraries have a designated reference desk that deals with these questions. What is interesting, however, is that the two libraries serving nursing and health sciences has more request regarding guidance and programs. This is because in the health sciences the tutors advise the students to use the library in their evidence-based work. Another factor is that both these libraries (P32 and Kjeller) offer more teaching and instruction to their students. It seems that teaching the students database searching or using EndNote will make them more aware of their need for support and guidance and create more questions.

The library is constantly broadening the services to the users. In our library, they can borrow photo, video and recording equipment. They can also borrow extension cables and chargers. What we can see from this study is that the most frequent questions asked by the students are about the library collections: how to retrieve and access material and how to manage their loans and returns (and their fees). Equipment like printers and scanners often lack paper or does not work properly. Having someone who can solve those problems immediately is important. The students appreciate meeting a librarian face to face, to get guidance on how to use the library or problems related to their reading or writing. We know that libraries feel like “safe places” were the students could ask “stupid” questions without being assessed.

Survey

The environment in which the students work is affecting the quality of the premises. We wanted to do a survey based on some of the factors mentioned by Hegde, Boucher & Lavelle (2018).

We made a small survey regarding the use of the premises on the ground floor, where we asked the users about their experiences and what they liked and disliked about the premises. This survey was distributed on every workstation on the ground floor. This was done several times during the staffed opening hours to catch up new visitors. The answers were collected anonymously in a closed box.

This survey was carried out one week in May. We handed out 170 questionnaires and received 88 answers, which gives us a response rate at 52%.

The questions in the survey is as follow, translated from Norwegian:

1. How often do you use these premises on the ground floor?
Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Seldom
2. What do you like the best with these premises? (tick one or several boxes)
 - Easy access to IT-support
 - Easy access to computers
 - Easy to find a study space
 - I meet people I know
 - It is quiet
 - It is nice to work alone
 - I find the premises to be accommodating
3. What do you not like about the premises? (tick one or several boxes)
 - It is noisy
 - It is cold
 - Lack of daylight
 - Few socket outlets (for charging)
 - Not suitable for group work
 - I find the premises not very accommodating

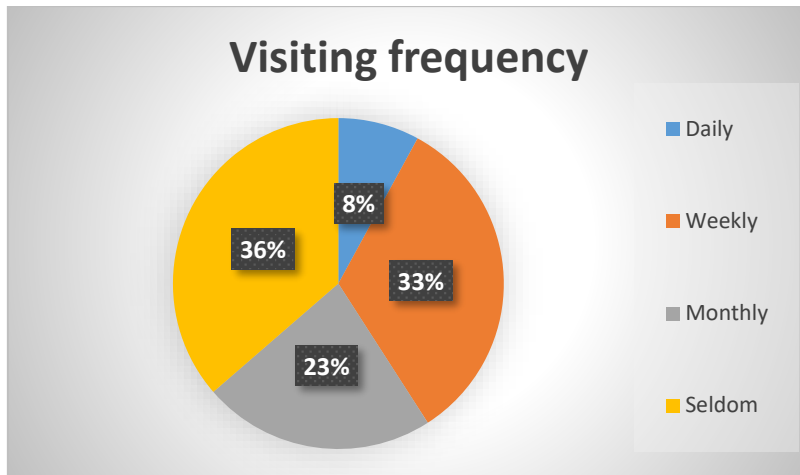


Fig. 4. Visiting frequency in the ground floor library space

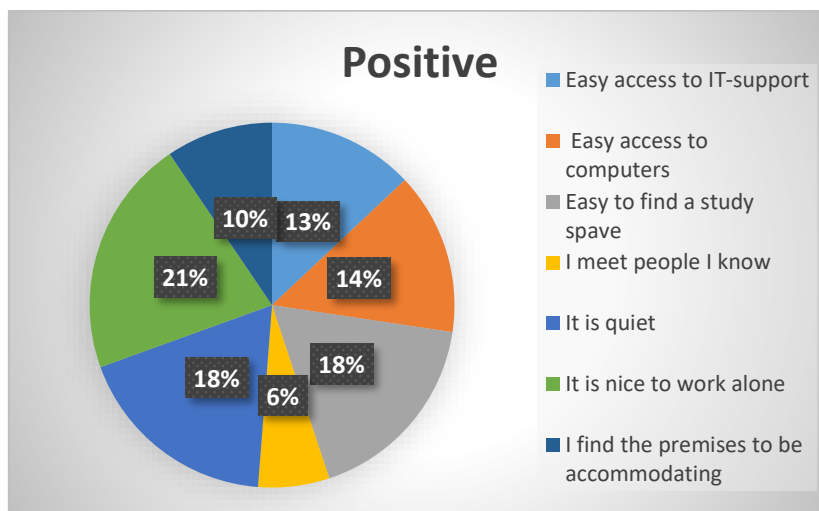


Fig. 5. Positive feedback of the premises

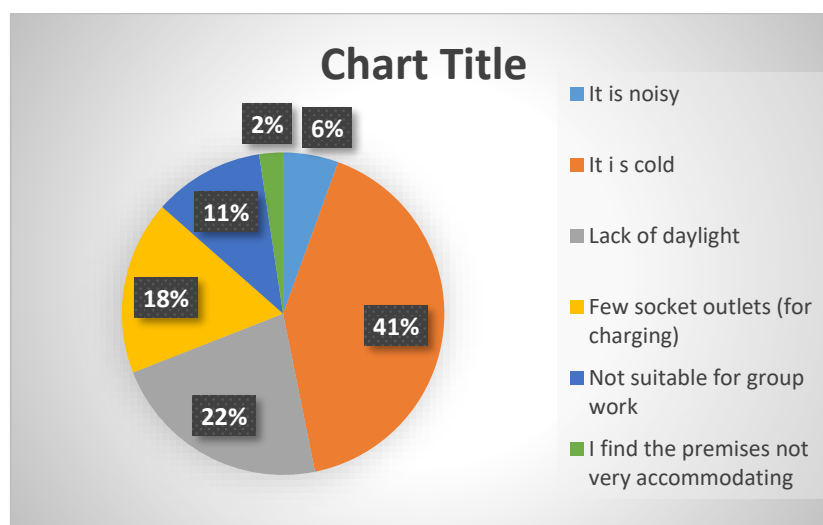


Fig. 6. Negative feedback of the premises

We were surprised to find that although the premises are cold and lack daylight, very few found the premises not accommodating (2%). The users appreciate that the premises are a quiet zone, suitable for working alone and with easy access to support. Easy access from the main entrance accommodates students' wish to work where they can see and be seen. This corresponds with the observations made by Gayton:

Sitting alone together, in a place to see and be seen, " as a communal activity " What they come for and value is the "communal" experience of seeing and being seen by others, quietly engaged in the same serious, studious activity" (Gayton, 2008, p. 61).

Conclusion

The library has a good variety of seating. Single and group seating are well utilized. In zones with single seating, the students prefer it to be silent and they take charge of level of noise in the area. Although they prefer quiet area, they do not use the silent reading room. Maybe this is because it is behind closed doors, or the use of computers is not allowed. The smaller silent computer room next door is well utilized. Maybe we should consider a different kind of zone. Altogether, this will need further considerations.

Both ground and first floor have a substantial number of computers. Those on the ground floor, close to the IT-support are popular. The 24-hour computer room is not utilized at all. The room is hard to find and hidden behind an anonymous door. Here we can remove a number of computers and replace them with other types of seating.

Smaller zones between the bookshelves are popular. We should try to create more enclosed seating with the use of bookshelves or other furniture. When we manage to create this kind of small spaces, they are always in use.

There is a constant need for group study rooms. There should be a mixture of bookable and "first come first served" rooms. Rooms occupied by one person only is not desired. We need to make clear rules for the use of the group study rooms. The library staff need to be more aware of the problem and take responsibility.

Proximity to the library services is valued, and the students should have easy access to guidance. Having competent library staff aware of the student needs is invaluable. Through the reading list system, the librarians are well informed about demands put on students. Having a competent library staff is crucial. Maybe a survey like this will improve the awareness of the librarians.

Our intention with performing the survey on the ground floor seating was an idea of making this area into a more active zone. We had an understanding that this room was cold and open but were surprised to find that the students were quite positive about the space. Although the majority found the space very cold, only 2% found the area not accommodating. We have to reconsider our plans for this area. The survey was simple and concrete with few questions. This was probably the reason for a good response, which gave us valuable feedback. We consider performing this kind of survey on other areas in the library.

We recently learned that the university is planning to upgrade part of the ground floor including some of the library premises. This gives us an opportunity to rethink our plans. The library's 24 hour room with 24 computers will be turned into group study area, and make it more accessible. This will affect the use of the rest of the library ground floor and an evaluation of these changes is needed before we decide on bigger changes. We can see that the refurbished parts of the library have been a success due to the frequently traffic-sweeps. By having long-term plans for the library space, we are always prepared for changes.

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