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The Library Desk in Academic Institutions: Reception or Pedagogical Tool?

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The authors work as research librarians and project managers of a large project at the University Library of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU UB). The project is funded by the National Library in Norway.

Abstract

The desk services at our university library provide support on a range of services, from circulation to questions about literature searching, reference management and so on. However, we have insufficient knowledge about the use of the desk services. To increase our understanding, we have launched a project called *TREFF, towards a new platform for the desk services at the University Library of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology*. The main goal of the project is to learn more about the personal meeting between students and library staff in times of increasing digitization of the library's collections and services. In addition, we want to explore how the desk services can contribute to the library's overall objective of supporting learning, teaching and research quality at our university.

We have explored the topic from the point of view of both students and library staff, based on the following research questions:

1. What is the purpose of the students' use of the library desk?
2. How do library staff and students experience the meeting that takes place at the desk?
3. How can the answers to the previous questions be utilized to identify and implement measures for further development?

We have combined several research methods: mapping of service desk activity, focus group and individual interviews, surveys and literature studies. The paper will present results from the data collections and the measures for improvement of the desk services. At the conference, we would like our presentation to be an introduction to group discussions. We expect that the topic will engage the audience, and we are curious about the participants' reflections. Hopefully, the discussions will bring us further in the process of defining the main purpose of the library desk in academic institutions: do we want it to be a reception or a pedagogical tool, or something in between?

Keywords:

University Library, Library Desk Service, Library Development

Introduction

In this paper, we present a project called *TREFF - towards a new platform for the desk services at the University Library of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology*. The project has taken place during the period 2017-2019. TREFF means “meeting” and is about the personal meeting between students and library staff at the library desk. In order to learn more about this meeting, we have carried out a number of data collections. Based on the collected data, we have identified several measurements for further development of the desk services. The paper will present and discuss results from the project.

Norwegian University of Science and Technology and the University Library (NTNU UB)

NTNU is a university with headquarters in Trondheim and, after a merger in 2016, campuses in Ålesund and Gjøvik, two smaller cities in Norway. NTNU has a main profile in science and technology, but also offer a variety of programs of professional study including the humanities, social sciences, economics, medicine, health sciences, educational science, architecture, entrepreneurship, art disciplines and artistic activities.

The university library is a public scientific library, with 15 branch libraries. The main object of the library is to support research and teaching at the university. The primary users are students and employees at NTNU and St. Olavs Hospital. The university library has 135 employees altogether, consisting of different employee categories, such as librarians, research librarians, advisors and consultants.

Desk services at the university library

The desk services provide support on a range of services, from circulation to questions about literature searching, research, reference management and so on. The branch libraries organize their service differently in terms of which employee categories that work at the desk, for how many hours a week, which tasks they do while working at the desk and so on. Most libraries have one desk for all kinds of questions, while a few have two, one for circulation and one for more complex questions about literature searching, research etc.

The TREFF project

Running 15 branch libraries, all with long opening hours, is resource consuming, especially when it comes to personnel. However, we have insufficient knowledge about the use of the service. Thus, in 2017 the library launched a two-part project: exploration of the service and then measures for further development. We chose to concentrate on one of our user groups: the students, but have explored the topic also from the library staff’s point of view. This is the project’s research questions:

1. What is the purpose of the students’ use of the library desk?
2. How do library staff and students experience the meeting that takes place at the desk?
3. How can the answers to the previous questions be utilized to identify and implement measures for further development?

The National Library of Norway has financed the project together with NTNU UB. The project has been organized with two project managers, a steering group and a reference group with participation from all sections of the library. The project management has emphasized seeking broad collaboration, both within the organization, with different teams, sections and groups in the library, but also externally, with other Norwegian university libraries, library research groups etc. We have collaborated with a research company to ensure that the research methods and data analysis are of good quality.

As a matter of form, as project managers we want to clarify our understanding and our point of view regarding the status and role of the desk service: we think this service is of great importance to the library and its users and should be further explored. In the course of work with the project, this foundation has given us both inspiration and direction.

We identified the following measures:

- Restructure the service desk area in one or more of the libraries. For instance, establish welcome zones.
- Develop information materials - placards and flyers - in order to inform students about what the library desk actually can do for them. Use this material in special campaigns to market the desk service.
- Have pop-up library desks from time to time, both in the library room and outside.
- Examine and further develop cooperation and information flow between the IT service at the university and the university library
- Arrange seminars, both on national and local level, on library desk issues
- Discuss and clarify the role of the library desk service in the organization: purpose, aims, competencies needed and so on. The process involves the whole organization, both management and employees.

Results

In this section we will present the results of the different research methods used in this project.

Mapping of service desk activity

Mapping of the activity in the different library desks around the university library showed that most of the questions from the students were about the physical collections. Totally, through all four weeks of registrations, 44 % of the questions were about loan services and document delivery. 19 % of the questions were about physical and electronic collections and access to them.

16 % were questions about practical things, like opening hours, lost stuff and where the group study rooms are. 7 % were about IT. 6 of the 15 libraries have IT-services for students inside the libraries and most of the IT questions in these libraries are handled there. Finally, the results show that 8 % of the questions from the four weeks of counting were reference questions and 2 % were about literature lists, reference management and reference management tools. There was a fairly even distribution of questions in the different categories during the year, but we registered some more reference questions in the April counting (11 %). The number of questions spreads evenly throughout the weekdays. We could see a slight increase in the middle of the week and a decrease in the end.

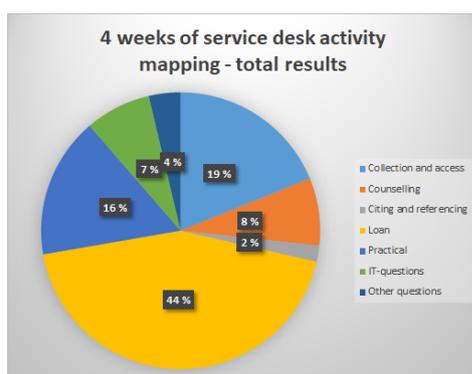


Figure 2 Mapping: total results

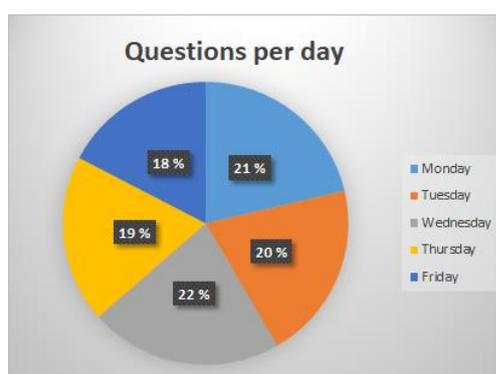


Figure 3 Questions per day

The number of questions was largely the same each of the four weeks.

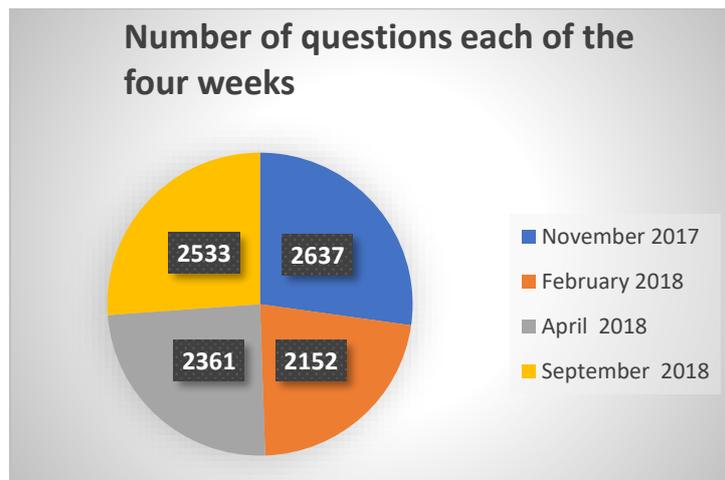


Figure 4 Questions per week

Surveys

The results from the employee-survey show that librarians and executive officers are the groups that for a large part run the library desks at The NTNU University Library. Academic librarians staff the desks, but not as frequently. Only librarians and executive officers staff the desks four times a week or more. Most of the staff work in the library desks 1-3 times per week (57%). 74% of the academic librarians staff the desks once a week or less.

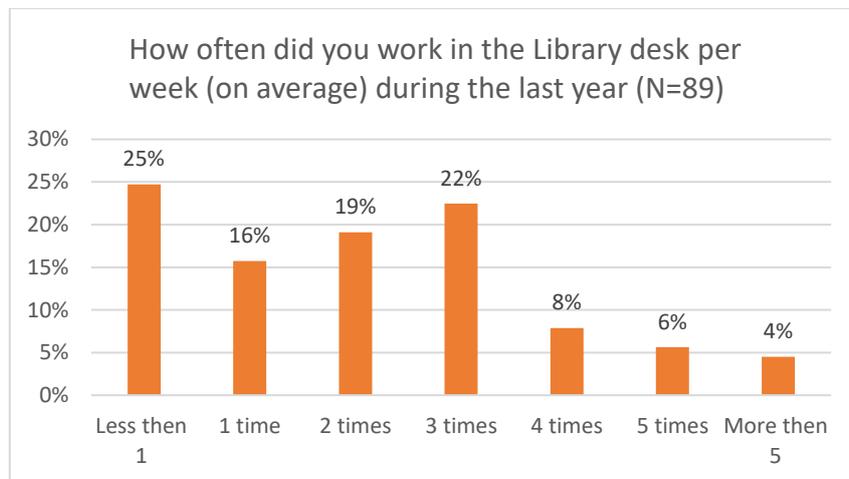


Figure 5 How often do you work in the library desk

Overall, the employees at the university library are satisfied with the amount of time they spend working in the library desks. The majority find working in the desks professionally challenging and interesting. We could see signs that the staff that work most frequently in the desks also where more satisfied with this type of work. 77% of the respondents like working in the library desk as much as working with other tasks or even better.

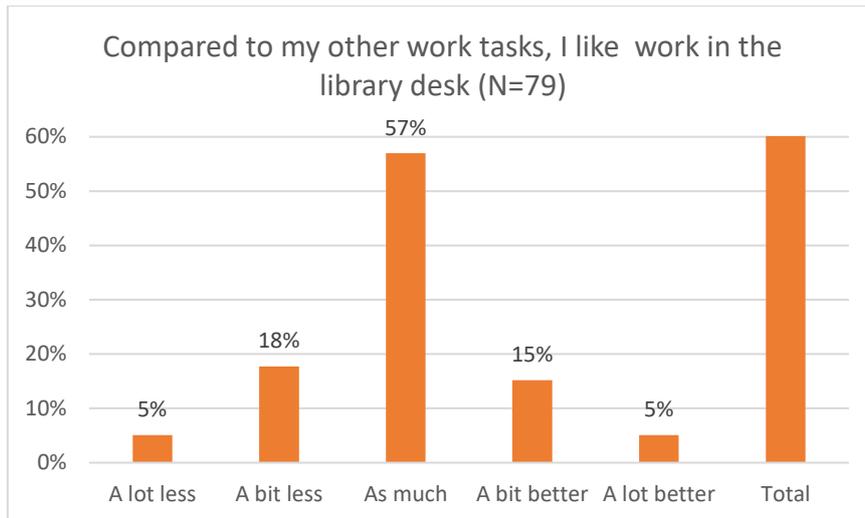


Figure 6 I like working in the library desk...

A large number (94 %) of respondents think that the library desk is an important meeting place between library and student.

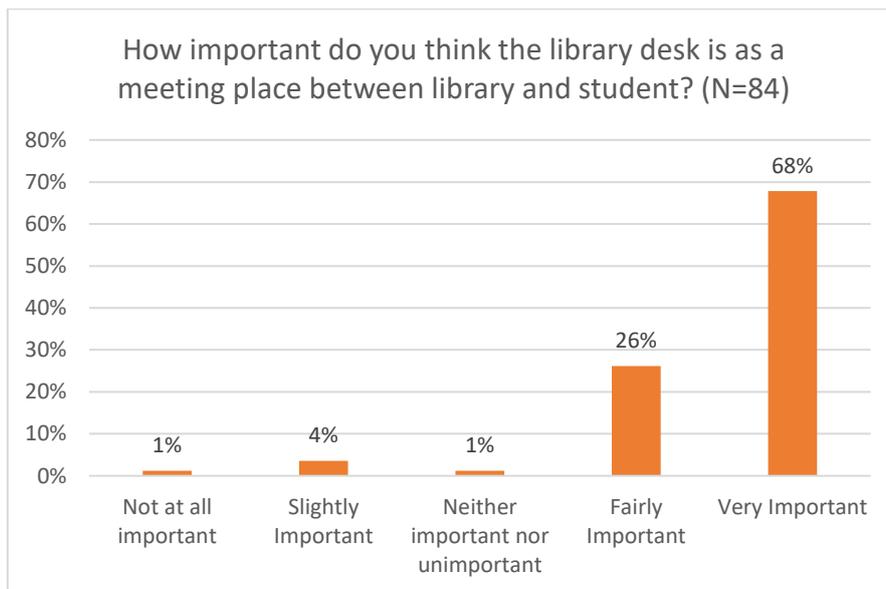


Figure 7 Importance of the library desk as a meeting place

Almost all of the respondents (99 %) believe the students are generally satisfied with the help they receive at the desk. No one has the impression that the students are dissatisfied (no answers in the dissatisfied-categories).

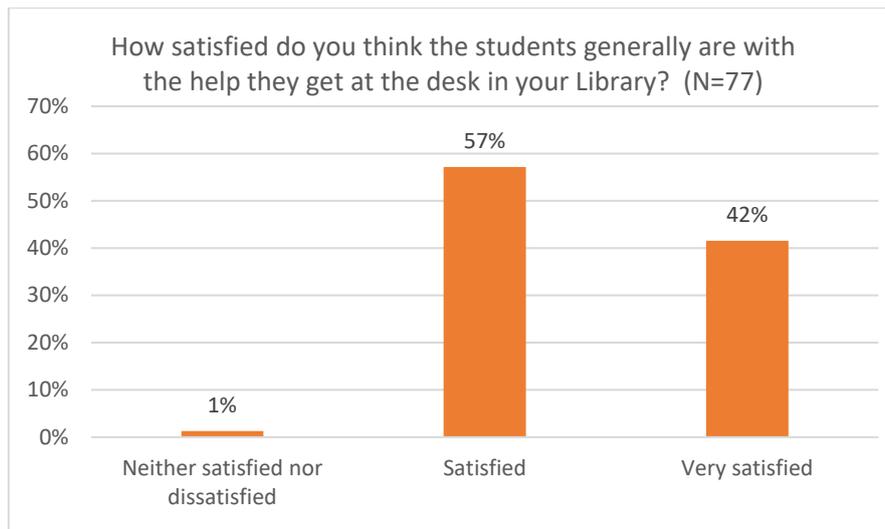


Figure 8 Are students satisfied?

A large proportion of the respondents (72 %) thinks the students avoid contacting the library desk although they probably need help.

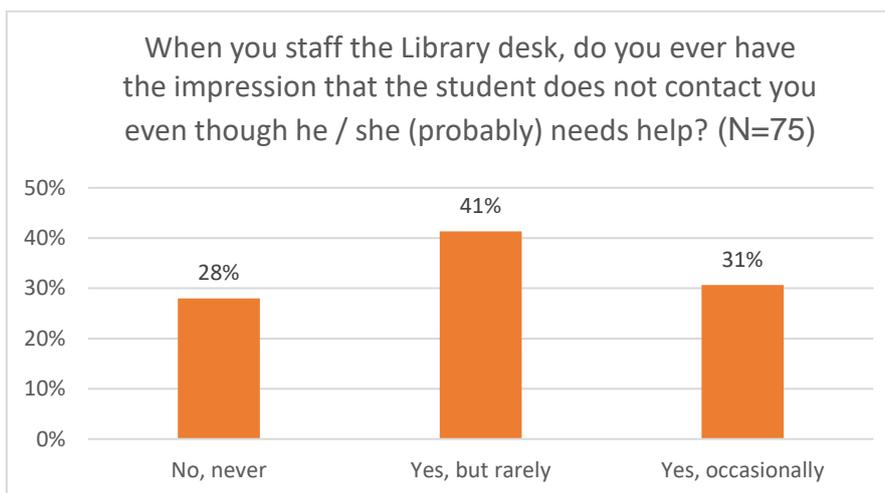


Figure 9 Impression of students not contacting the desk

13 % of the respondents answer that they very often or often need help from other people in the library that are experts on the subject, when asked about database searching or writing assignments. When it comes to reference tools, 33% need help often or very often.

Half of the library employees state that the meeting with the student and problems they encounter in the desk, often or very often are subject for discussions in informal conversations with colleagues. 37 % state that the same topic often or very often is discussed in formal contexts, like meetings.

Focus group and individual interviews

When interviewing the students about their experiences with the library, we found that books are important to them and that the questions they ask in the library are about the things they see in the room, the obvious. Most of the questions were about the physical collections. This corresponds with the findings from mapping students' questions in the desks, where a total of 63% of the questions are about loans and collections.

"I use the library mostly for course syllabus, read mostly at school and in the library, overnight loans, get hold of extra literature for assignments." ¹

"(use the library for)...course syllabus, an overview of the literature, searching for a bachelor thesis, borrow a lot, use the library more and more. Look through books to review the need for purchase."

When approaching the library desks, the students prefer to ask short questions of practical nature. Many of the students tell that they do not wish to disturb the library staff or take up their time, or the time for others waiting in line.

"I think: do not take up so much time, if someone else comes, at least do not make a queue."

"Many of the fellow students think this, do not disturb. Need to borrow scissors is OK, but not more comprehensive questions than that."

Furthermore, the students express that they are hesitant to ask if they are not quite sure that the desk is the place where they will get the answer. We found a lack of knowledge about the library staff's expertise and competences. The students do not actually know what the librarians do and what kind of help they can get in the library desks. Although they might need it, they do not turn to the library desks to get help with their study needs.

"Never think they are too busy to be asked, but don't know what they can, except answering short questions."

"...thinking that we will not bother the librarians with anything they may not know. I think so and probably many I go to class with. You are supposed to take care of the library."

The students prefer to be self-reliant, but they add that they spend a lot of unnecessary time trying to cope in the library on their own.

"There is a lot I don't realize I could ask for. I use much unnecessary time though."

Several of the students in our interviews agree that the staff in the library desks has a "security function" and that it is nice and reassuring that someone is there in case a need arises. In addition, they wish to have the opportunity to ask questions in the desk, even if they do not use the library desk now.

"If there is something you do not understand, then you are stuck if you have no one to ask."

When the students go to the service desks and ask questions, they are generally satisfied with the help they receive. One student in particular was concerned with the importance of each meeting. The one meeting could be the only one that student has with the library staff that term, and the experience is what she brings with her and talks about with her fellow students. Each meeting is unique to each student.

The students have several opinions on how the physical environment in and around the library desks could be improved. One of the students state that the desk is an obstacle between "you" and "us". One suggestion was to minimize the obstacle by using smaller tables, instead of a large desk. This way the student could stand together with a librarian and get help with the research question away from the library desk.

Discussion

Our survey and our interviews show that students and staff agree on the importance of the meeting at the desk. Both parts consider the desk to hold an important role as a meeting place between library staff and students. Still we find that only 37 % of the respondents in the employee survey state that desk-related issues often or very often are the subject of discussions in formal contexts of meetings. We think this is a rather small percentage when we

¹ All the citations are originally in Norwegian and have been translated by the authors of this paper

take into consideration the importance of the desks, in the staffs' view. This raises the question of whether the work in the library desk is not considered important enough to be on the agenda.

In the interviews, the students tell us that they are content with being self-reliant. On the other hand, we see signs that the library could represent a more effective study environment if the students were to exploit the full potential in the meeting with the library staff.

From our studies, we learn that the students want to have the library staff present in case they have questions. This corresponds to findings in Allan's study [2016, s. 120] and a study by Matthews [2013], referred to by Allan. Following the same line of thoughts, we may claim that the existence of the library desks and the opportunity to ask represents value to the students even if they do not use it at present.

Students and staff have a common understanding about how satisfied the students are with the service at the desk. Staff thinks students are happy with the help they receive, and students report that they really are. However, we find that the students lack awareness of what they can ask about in the desks and of what competencies the library staff have. They connect the library staff to the books and the physical collections that are visible in the libraries. Consequently, the students ask mostly about loans and collections when they approach the library staff in the desk. This result is supported by findings in Allan's ethnographic study [2016, s. 120], where Allan found that the students unveiled that they did not know what librarians do, or they associated librarians to books or help with computer problems. Until now, we have taken it for granted that the students know about our competencies and the possibilities to get help with their literature searching and academic writing. For the future, we have to ask ourselves if our inability to market our service is connected to unclear organizational goals for the desk service - or not formulated goals at all? Is there an unexploited potential in the library desks and expertise waiting to be used?

The shortages in knowledge that is so crucial to students' understanding about how they can use, and benefit from, their library needs to be dealt with. The actions we must take have to go deeper than merely working to get more people inside the doors of the library. In our project, we have suggested increased marketing, focusing on librarian competencies and informing more directly about what students can get an answer to in the library desks. We have also intensified the effort of taking the library desk out of the library to rise library awareness. While these are important measures, we ultimately believe that real change will not take place until we have established clear goals and strategies for the role of the library desks, and methods for achieving them.

With the TREFF project, we have initiated several measures that we think will improve the desk service at the university library, some small, others more comprehensive. We think that many activities that work together and at the same time will have great importance in the long term. It is a continuous work. We intend for instance to repeat the special campaigns several times to market the desk service and have pop-up library desks from time to time in the following years. We also believe that it is a good idea to organize more seminars and workshops on the desk function. The experiences with the seminars we have arranged in the project period, both internal and national, have been very good. We have received a lot of positive feedback and have clearly inspired several universities and university colleges to start their own library desks projects. We hope that this success can be repeated and that the university library will arrange such seminars even after the project period is over.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented a project called *TREFF - towards a new platform for the desk services at the University Library of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology*. We have focused on the meeting between library staff and students in the library desks. Our findings show that although both students and staff are satisfied with the meetings, the students lack knowledge about what the library really can do for them and the library organization does not have much focus on this part of their service. Through this project we have succeeded in starting some conversations about the library desks as a meeting place, both within and our own organization and beyond. We realize that change seldom happens quickly, it takes patience and sometimes many small actions in order to start a bigger movement.

There are still things that we can do to broaden our understanding about this part of the library service further. Conducting focus group interviews with the library staff could for instance have elaborated the results from the survey. In the survey, we also included the student assistants, but we chose to exclude these data from the results. We wish to continue our work with analyzing also these results; we believe there are interesting findings to be explored in the answers from this group.

The TREFF project has put the library desk function on the agenda and increased the awareness of this area in our university library. The project has also provided a better knowledge base of how the library desks really work. A solid and relevant knowledge base is necessary to develop a common understanding of the role of the desk service in the organization; purpose, aims, competencies needed and so on. This process will involve the whole organization, both management and employees, in the time to come. But most important, we believe, is that the organization starts to discuss what role we want the library desk service to really have – do we want it to be a reception or a pedagogical tool?

Acknowledgement

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