



Case study: Accessibility Centre, Birkbeck

Library Services

Birkbeck, University of London

About the organization

Organisation:	Birkbeck, University of London
Department:	Library Services
Size:	50 + staff
Industry Sector:	Higher Education

Background

12% of the student population at Birkbeck College has registered a disability (approx. 1000 students).

The Library identified the need for dedicated study space for disabled students where they could make use of assistive technologies with staffed drop-in support. The Library's first Assistive Technology Centre (ATC) was not a discrete room, but in an area between the (silent) Reading Room and the AV stacks which offered a reasonable degree of privacy and quiet. However, feedback from the Centre's users, the reassignment of adjacent areas and the distance between the Library entrance and the ATC, all suggested that the Library needed to find a new space better suited to its users' needs.

Features of the Accessibility Centre

In September 2016, Birkbeck opened a new Accessibility Centre for students with disabilities and dyslexia. It includes 10 workstations and is located on the first floor of the library near the MFDs and the library toilets.

Features of the room include:

- Individual lighting, controlled by switches at the door
- Desk lamps
- Wheelchair accessible automatic door
- Scanners and headphones at every workstation
- Ergonomic chairs

- Height adjustable tables
- Hearing induction loop
- Visual fire alarm
- Printer enabled for colour and double-sided printing that does not require the user to log in
- Coloured printing paper

In common with all Birkbeck computers, the room's PCs have the following assistive software on them: MindView, ClaroRead, ZoomText, JAWs and Dragon.



Use of the Accessibility Centre by students

The Centre is staffed Monday to Friday, 4pm-6pm (Birkbeck's busiest period) by members of the Library Disability and Dyslexia team as well as other library staff drawn from a range of different teams. Staff assist students with general library enquiries, as well as with the use of specialist software and equipment. In the autumn term, the feedback we received was mixed, with some regulars missing the old ATC, mostly due to the old room being more tucked away and therefore posing fewer distractions. However it was noticeable that many more new students started using the Centre and students with mobility difficulties are now better able to access the room as they no longer have to navigate through crowded study spaces to get to it. During term time, the room is frequently at full capacity. The difficulties encountered in the autumn term were mainly around students who felt that the space should be silent (although it is located in a quiet area of the library) and

students who believed that others should not be entitled to use the room as their disability was not 'visible'. We therefore decided to install two adjustable tables and dedicated PCs on the 3rd floor of the library which is a silent floor. Following a few incidents between students, we discussed whether or not we should install CCTV cameras but decided that this was not the best approach. We wrote and displayed an Accessibility Centre charter to encourage students with a wide range of disabilities to share the room in the best possible conditions.

As well as promoting the charter, we asked library staff to go into the room while on roving duty to ensure that students were aware of the presence of library staff. This also promoted the idea amongst library staff that we all have a responsibility to students with disabilities and dyslexia, fostering a more inclusive service and ensuring staff became aware of the various kinds of assistive technology students might use.

We carried out a library space survey between November and December which included questions about the Accessibility Centre. 66% of students said that they liked it; 27% that they liked it with reservations and 7% said that they didn't like it.

We recorded a lot less complaints in the Spring and Summer terms, as students got used to the space.

Benefits /Recommendations

Our feedback suggests that having a separate room is desirable for many students with disabilities and dyslexia, particularly if the room has a door. Many students with autistic spectrum disorders and specific learning difficulties report needing a calm, quiet, distraction free environment in which they can control elements of their environment, particularly lighting. It is not currently possible to provide this in the wider library, and so the Accessibility Centre was an opportunity to create this kind of space. The ideal though, given the conflicts that have inevitably arisen due to users of the room having different needs, would be to have all areas of the wider library designed as inclusive and accessible. This would allow students to have wider choices about where they can study and reduce the pressures on space that the room faces during term time.

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