**Stick or Twist: how have the experiences of 20-21 shaped customer services?**

**Summary of break out discussions**

The recent CSGUK conference included a breakout session giving delegates an opportunity to share experiences with colleagues from a wide range of libraries on how our services have responded to the pandemic. Discussion was based around the stick or twist theme of the conference. This gave a chance to consider if any of the recent changes and adjustments to our services had led to more permanent shifts.

**Spaces**

Managing our library spaces has perhaps been the most challenging aspect of the pandemic with social distancing, track and trace requirements, seat bookings and enhanced cleaning all at play when libraries began to emerge from lockdown in summer 2020. The majority of participants reported their libraries had been managing study spaces with pre-booked seats throughout the 2020/21 session. While in general there is no longer a requirement for seat bookings, some libraries have retained bookable seats in certain areas to manage demand and meet student expectations, with others planning to resume a booking system during peak periods. Enhanced cleaning and the provision of wipes, sanitiser and other products has been maintained.

A common theme in the discussion was a notable shift in student expectations around finding suitable space to engage with online teaching sessions, either individually or with colleagues. This has presented challenges in some cases where the configuration of study areas is not appropriate for such activities. There were several interesting examples shared of Zoom Rooms and Nook Pods, clearly helping provide a better environment for individuals or groups experiencing digital poverty and unsuitable home environments for studying. Most of our libraries reported that group study spaces have reopened in 2021/22 but with reduced capacities. In some cases, adapting library spaces to allow for social distancing has resulted in a more permanent shift, as it provided an opportunity to rethink the configuration of study areas and retire some old items of furniture.

If the delivery of a hybrid teaching model continues in the longer term, there will certainly be ongoing challenges for our libraries in managing our spaces to meet the changes in student learning needs and expectations.

**Services**

Social media was widely used during the pandemic to keep libraries engaged with our user communities and online chat support was extended by many libraries. In most cases, these changes to online interaction with library users were being maintained. Meanwhile, though, there have been changes in the approach to how we interact with students in person around our libraries.

The 2021/22 session has presented the unique scenario of the majority of students in both Years 1 and 2 being new to the physical environment of the University and library spaces. This resulted in some innovative approaches to delivering inductions, including making virtual tours of the library available to help familiarise students with their library environment, thereby dovetailing the twists we have made to our physical and online services.

Help desk service hours have not yet returned to their pre-pandemic levels in many libraries but online chat is increasingly being promoted as the default “go-to” enquiry service, whether students are engaging remotely or from within our library walls. Zoom and MS Teams are becoming established as the platforms for delivering 1:1 user support and this has given more flexibility to how these are delivered.

**Resources**

The pandemic meant libraries had to respond in an agile way to enabling user access to library resources – Click & Collect and Scan & Send entered the lexicon of library jargon in 2020. For many these were temporary adjustments, but the discussions highlighted some examples where such services have been maintained or repurposed; for example, where postal loans might previously have been offered only to specific cohorts of students, there are examples of this becoming a more universal service. Click & Collect has also become an established service for some libraries. The pandemic resulted in many libraries moving away from short loan periods, removing overdue charges and introducing automatic renewals and many of these adjustments are now embedded.

A recurring theme, though, and reported by almost all participants is a notable decline in print borrowing from our libraries. For many, this is a continuation of the pre-pandemic trend but time will tell if student expectations have shifted as wider engagement with online learning perhaps signals a change towards e-books being preferred to print.

**Staffing**
The general trend for Universities to embrace the concept of agile working has presented quite specific challenges and tensions for services with a focus on supporting on-campus activities, whether that be managing study spaces or other services requiring staff intervention. With a great variety of organisational and staffing structures in play across the H.E sector, the discussions not surprisingly revealed a wide range of approaches to staff working patterns and modes of service delivery. However, it was abundantly clear that the customer facing teams across the H.E library sector have been absolutely integral to maintaining our services and spaces, enabling students to access resources and generally keeping our library show on the road in the last 18 months.

And overall whether we’ve been sticking, twisting or involved in any other manoeuvres our libraries have been absolutely integral in supporting students during these challenging times. The output from our conference presentations and discussions clearly evidence the central role of the library in the student experience.