

'Ask a Librarian live' – bringing your library to you!

Introduction

Cardiff University Information Services provides a wide range of printed and online information resources and special collections, almost 2,500 individual and group study spaces across 16 modern and flexible libraries, and a high speed computer network. The libraries also provide self-service lending facilities, as well as access to photocopying, printing and IT services.

We are always looking for new and creative ways to help our users make the best use of our resources, and to enable them to focus on their studies and research in the most effective and productive way.

Why 'Ask a Librarian live'?

In an environment where social tools and communication technologies are constantly evolving and developing, we wanted to offer something new to our library users – flexible, one-to-one advice and assistance provided by dedicated, approachable library staff, online and in real time.

The 'Ask a Librarian live' chat enquiry service aims to extend the provision of specialist support for library users. Almost all undergraduate students have used chat or instant messaging in their personal lives. The service therefore provides a convenient way to communicate with library staff, as an alternative to physically attending the library or emailing/phoning with a query.

The pilot service is running during the 2010/11 academic year. Extensive analysis and evaluation of the chat transcripts and staff and user feedback will help to inform us about how well we are performing, and whether there is a user requirement to expand the pilot into a permanent 'Ask a Librarian live' service.

Originality and suitability for our users

'Ask a Librarian live' supports our users in a fresh and innovative way. The service provides users with the opportunity to communicate directly with library staff at their point of need, wherever they are. Questions about our resources and services are answered instantly and the service is available to a variety of users with different needs and requirements. The service can be used from any computer with a web browser.

Cardiff is the first university in Wales to implement this type of library instant messaging service, and is just one of two UK Higher Education institutions to use LibraryH3lp (the software tool selected for the service).

Ease of user access

'Ask a Librarian live' is available on the Cardiff University library website, as well as through the University's internal portal, so anyone – whether internal or external to the University – can access the service. The screenshot below shows the library chat service in operation on the University website.

The screenshot displays the Cardiff University Information Services website. The header includes the Cardiff University logo and the text 'Information Inspiration Innovation'. A navigation menu lists 'INSRV Home', 'Libraries', 'LT', 'Electronic Resources', 'Graphics and Media', and 'Education and Training'. The main content area is titled 'Libraries' and features a sidebar with a list of library-related links. The central text describes 16 library sites and provides a list of services. A 'What do you want to do today?' section lists various tasks like using the Voyager catalogue and finding a library. Below this, a 'Not sure what you need? Try our pilot Library Chat Service.' section states that the service is available Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. A chat window is open, showing a conversation between a user and a librarian named Sonja. The chat history includes: '1:55 me Hi, Sonja here. Please let me answer my own query, need to take some screenshots', '1:55 culiby1 Hi Sonja', '1:55 culiby1 How can I help?', '1:56 me I would like to know more about the Virtual Librarian project.', '1:56 culiby1 This is a pilot project that we will be running for one year in the first instance.', and '1:56 me I really like it and staff have said they enjoy answering queries this way. Thank you.'

Effective use of resources

The majority of resources used for the project were already available to us within the University.

Existing staff answer the enquiries, with a rota system ensuring that the service is well staffed throughout the day. The service is staffed directly from the librarians' desks, making it easy and convenient to operate.

The set-up and customisation of LibraryH3lp was easy and quick, and was completed by Information Services IT staff. No extra equipment was required as the product is accessed via a simple web interface. The only additional financial cost was \$400 per year for the LibraryH3lp software licence.

All of the above means that this service is very sustainable, should we decide to make this a fully supported service for the next academic year.

Planning and promoting the service

Co-ordination and consistency of approach

In order to make 'Ask a Librarian live' as effective and successful as possible, it was important to involve all the relevant members of staff at an early stage of the planning process.

Extensive discussions with various IT teams within Information Services took place, as well as consultation with the University's web team. Co-ordination and consultation with and between the University's 16 libraries was, and is, a key component. The service is operated by more than 70 Site Librarians, Subject Librarians and Senior Library Assistants from the different library sites who all work in partnership for this project.

To ensure that all staff provide consistent answers (and to save time with frequent questions), a set of communication guidelines and an online staff forum offers helpful URLs, FAQs and common responses, and provides a place for 'Ask a Librarian live' staff to share experiences and ideas.

Promotional activities

As this is a pilot project, we did not know how much attention 'Ask a Librarian live' would attract initially. Therefore it was purposely not advertised widely at the start, in order to avoid generating more demand than we could cope with. However, we did try to use a variety of media (including social) to promote the service.

'Ask a Librarian live' was advertised on the University website via news items, and on various web pages throughout the Information Services site. An advertising campaign was also launched in the University portal, which delivers targeted news to the individual user, meaning that our messages could be focused to specific audiences. Some of the library staff have 'Tweeted' about the service, and have received positive feedback.

It was demonstrated in induction sessions in the autumn, providing a great opportunity to let students know more about the new service. If 'Ask a Librarian live' becomes permanent, the service will also be promoted in various Information Services publications in the new academic year, together with wider campaigns on the University website and portal. Given the volume of use, and the fact that three quarters of queries are from people working away from the campus, the publicity has clearly been successful. The slide below provides some initial usage statistics.

Basic statistics

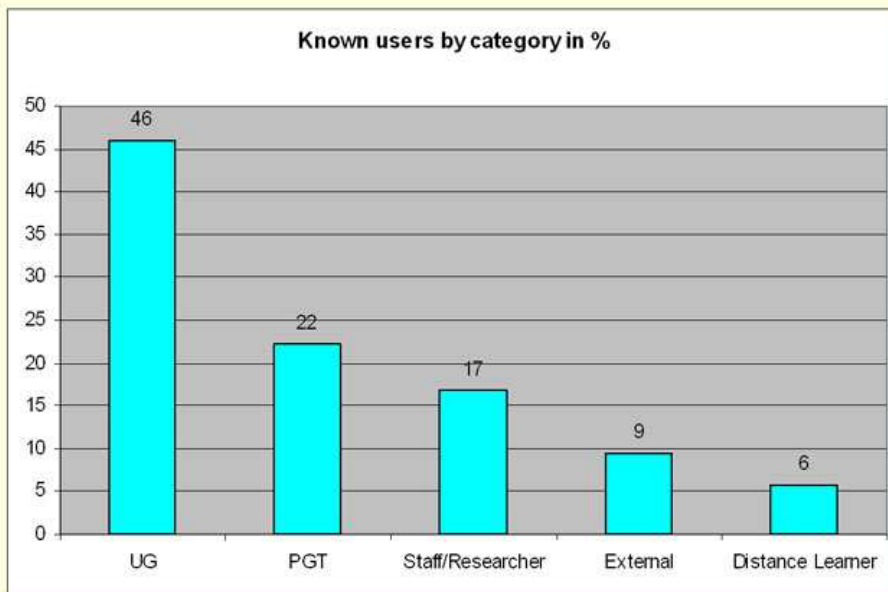
- As of Monday, 21st February, we have received **1428** chat requests via 'Ask a Librarian live'
- Longest chat conversation so far: **55** minutes (included information literacy training)
- Average % of time the service is busy: **20**
- Approximately **3/4** of users off-campus
- **83%** of queries answered directly, **11%** chat requests received out of hours or users left early, **6%** required follow-up actions from library staff
- Top **3** queries:
 - PIN numbers (for library accounts)
 - Databases
 - Electronic journals

Evaluation, outcomes and next steps

Reaching out to existing users and attracting new audiences

Anyone – whether internal or external to Cardiff University – can use 'Ask a Librarian live'. Designed to provide a new way of getting in touch and making our resources more available and accessible, the service is used for a wide variety of purposes – from providing information about opening hours and locations, to giving more detailed guidance and advice on using our services, referencing and other key skills.

Staff and students of other institutions, from as far away as Korea, have already made use of our chat facility to enquire about our services and resources, demonstrating that 'Ask a Librarian live' appeals to a variety of users and that it is helping us reach out beyond the University, perhaps encouraging potential students to come to Cardiff. The slide below shows the different user categories.



Please note that the majority of users (62%) are anonymous and cannot be categorised. They have therefore been excluded from the chart above.

information services
gwasanaethau gwybodaeth

Sharing our experiences

'Ask a Librarian live' has been demonstrated to many different audiences – from various teams within Information Services interested in the technology and its capabilities, to other staff groups across the University, keen to learn more about how such a service might fit in with their own work and engagement with users.

Further afield, a series of talks and demonstrations is planned for various events throughout the summer, including the Bibliothekartag (the Annual German Library Conference), the Gregynog Colloquium, and a CILIP UC&R Wales event.

Gathering feedback

We have been very keen to gather as much feedback as possible during the pilot service to help identify how it is being received. Many users convey their feedback at the end of individual library chats. A selection of these is available on the PowerPoint slides below.

information services
gwasanaethau gwybodaeth

Thank you so much for your help! ... I haven't used this service before and am very impressed! Thanks again

Brilliant. This service is a really good idea!

thanks for your help ... i love this service :)

okay. thank you so much. absolute lifesaver!

thanks a million! Thanks again! I shall be on here all the time now you've been so helpful!

thanks for your help, you save me a 20 min walk.

thank you so so much for your help ... its really appreciated

thankyou very much! ask a librarian live is awesome!

You are wonderful - thank you :-)) and have a nice day



information services
gwasanaethau gwybodaeth

hooray! thanks so much for ur help!... this "ask a librarian live" is so cool...

Thank you so much! I was really struggling then! :-)

thank's very much for ur help dear librarian ;)

really love this new service!

Your help was fantastic

This service is great. I'm becoming a frequent flyer - do you do reward points?

This is a really cool service by the way...

This live Librarian service is really good. Many thanks. I'm sure it'll be a big hit :-)

Thanks so much. this is a brilliant library service!

thanks so much for your help. ive never done the live lib help - its fantastic! you deserve a beer now!

this new service is really rather amazing!



information services
gwasanaethau gwybodaeth

information services
gwasanaethau gwybodaeth

Thanks so much for doing that - I didn't have to come back out into the rain!

fantastic service - can you do my dissertation too?

this method is soo cool

Excellent customer service!

Thank-you so much for your help. And could you pass on whoever is reviewing the funding for this pilot service, that I think it's the best way of asking a librarian for help that i've come across. So speedy. :D

brilliant service

Awesome.

you are a star

Thank you for your BIG HELP!!

I think this 'ask a librarian live' service is really effective. Many thanks for your help :)

the system is a good idea especially for those on placements far away

information services
gwasanaethau gwybodaeth



We have also received face to face feedback – users have commented to staff in the libraries about the service, and there have been positive discussions in various seminar groups and meetings between students and academic staff.

To gather more structured information, a short user survey has been made available for four weeks during the spring semester. The link to the survey is included on the web pages containing the chat facility, and also at the end of each library chat. We have also created a short survey for the library staff operating the service.

Next steps

The first few months have already proven so successful that the service hours have been extended, again as a pilot. For four weeks only, the service is being staffed an additional two hours (between 5pm-7pm) on Monday-Thursday evenings.

An extensive review and full evaluation will take place following the pilot to determine whether the service will become permanent, and which hours it will cover. This will include a study of all survey results, feedback and analysis of how other services have been affected as a result of the facility.

information services
gwasanaethau gwybodaeth

Conclusion

The 'Ask a Librarian live' pilot service was launched on the 27th September 2010, and will run until August 2011. Since its launch, already over 1,400 chat requests have been received.

The implementation of 'Ask a Librarian live' has been a positive learning experience for all involved, encouraging co-ordination, organisation and communication between the numerous individuals and teams involved in the project.

The service is also invaluable in developing and honing key skills and information literacy techniques amongst our users. When answering queries, library staff have been able to advise and guide users through the process of finding out information for themselves, often in more detail than would be possible in a telephone call or email exchange. The longest chat session so far has lasted 55 minutes and provided the user with valuable one to one information literacy skills training.

'Ask a Librarian live' offers another way to find information, guidance and details about the resources and services we offer. It is flexible, easy and quick to use, and its success so far has demonstrated that our users see it as a valuable addition to their academic work and study. As one of the lecturers put it: 'Ask a Librarian – live [a little]!'