

# **The Devil's in the Detail – operating a 24x7 Library**

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## **Abstract**

Curtin University clients have been interested for many years in the Library providing more access to the physical building along with services. In 2013 the Library building underwent a major refurbishment to cater for these needs. Once complete it was possible to position the Library towards a stage by stage progressive journey to a 24x7 model. At the beginning of 2015 we have achieved what was once considered unattainable, a Library open 24 hours a day.

This presentation follows the journey from the traditional Full Service model to the flexible 24x7 Limited Services model in use today and highlights the opportunities and challenges faced, resulting in an overwhelmingly positive reception.

When considering the changes necessary to achieve our objective we had to take into account the issues of an aging building; the staffing considerations (who, what, when, where and why) and also the traditional mindsets of what a library is there for.

While the student experience is providing an environment conducive to their study needs, casual spaces to relax and recharge are also available. Library staff support their overnight needs and a security officer provides the safe and secure surrounds.

Over the last 18 months we have implemented and reviewed our model, and while it will be ever evolving we think that we have achieved best practice.

## Introduction

The definition of evolution is *“the gradual development of something.”*<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, libraries have been designed to protect, archive, store and save resources to meet the information and recreational needs of their clients not only in the present, but also for the future. The collections within Libraries require cataloguing, indexing and organisation. Staff need to be knowledgeable, innovative, responsive to client needs, and above all, they have to be willing to follow queries and issues through to their conclusion.

As resources, collections, staffing and client demands continue to change, the hours these services are available and the physical environment from which these services are offered need to continually evolve. Along with a host of other requests, when surveyed, students at Curtin consistently requested longer study hours in the library. These surveys have been conducted on a regular basis by the Student Guild, the University and by the Library. As part of supporting the university in its Vision 2030 strategic plan<sup>2</sup>, to be a recognised international leader in research and education, the library identified that longer opening hours would also provide a ‘richly interactive and personalised learning experience for our students.’ To further its reputation for being ‘bold, future-focused and innovative’ the university provided a refurbishment budget to remodel the library to provide a safe and conducive study space in a 24x7 environment.

Curtin University started its life as the Perth Technical College in 1900 located in the Perth CBD and moved to Bentley when it was incorporated into the new Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) in 1966<sup>3</sup>. Expansion was rapid over the next 6 years as other Colleges were merged with WAIT and the Bentley campus opened its first central library in 1972<sup>4</sup>. The Library expanded its physical space and introduced the first online catalogue in 1992.<sup>5</sup>

However, opening hours for the Robertson Library remained static at 73.5 hours, 6 days per week over the next 3 decades until 2000 when the Library expanded the hours to open on Saturdays. As a response to ongoing client demand, from 2008 the Library continually moved forward increasing the opening hours during Semester. Ongoing feedback received from the Library’s clientele was that the ideal scenario would be a 24 x 7 model.

After a 6 year journey in Semester 2 2014, a 24 x 7 sustainable model was finally achieved and as the title of this paper “The Devil’s in the Detail – operating a 24x7 library” indicates, getting to this stage has been a gradual process with specific targets which will continue to evolve into the future.

## How did we get here?

The real journey began in 2008. As a result of ever increasing student demand and feedback for longer opening hours, particularly around exam times, an evolutionary learning model was developed to facilitate continual change and improvement. This model needed to be flexible and sustainable to support the changing environment and future demands.

The Library began increasing hours by extending the closing time during study and exam weeks at the end of each semester. Feedback was analysed to determine whether the incremental changes were working and whether more could be done. It was identified that a need existed for longer opening hours. Requests for the Library to open earlier were met with the first iteration of Limited Services, whereby the Library building was opened with one Library Assistant and Security on call for one hour before our Full Service operation.

From 2010 until 2012 these hours remained static while refurbishment plans were reviewed and approved. This also allowed time to review both the Full Service and Limited Service models for sustainability and responsiveness. The outcome of the reviews resulted in the identification of the need to further evolve the Limited Services model to provide additional evening hours. The second iteration of Limited Services was introduced in 2012, with the Full Service operation closing earlier and a study hall environment on 2 levels being provided until midnight 7 days a week. This model was maintainable during the extensive refurbishment undertaken during 2013 and into the beginning of 2014.

At the same time the refurbishment was completed, the library implemented a new library management system and the next version of Limited Services was introduced keeping levels 2 and 3 of the Library open until 2am in a Study Hall environment. The new model was also endorsed by Curtin Security as this would create one central location in the middle of the campus unlike the multiple venues spread across campus they were currently monitoring and supporting.

During Semester 1 2014, as a result of further feedback, the remaining floors were gradually opened also using a Limited Services model. This allowed access to the collections, group study rooms and also silent study areas. Study and exam week of the same period saw the entire building open until 2am.

Semester 2, 2014 finally saw the current iteration of the complete building open for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in a Limited Services model.

## **Challenges along the way**

As you can imagine, providing this type of service is not as easy as it sounds, simply opening the doors is not enough. Challenges were inherent in providing these new services to students. Building infrastructure, maintenance, staffing, and security, to name a few all had to be put into place in a structured manner to ensure the longevity and sustainability of the model. Consultation, discussion and meetings were undertaken with relevant parties both within the Library and across the University. A 'living' document was created to provide all the necessary information required for action. This document is reviewed for every change required (e.g. semester opening and closing, Easter and Anzac Day closures and semester break opening and closing), and continues to provide valuable insight into the workings of a 24x7 model.

The University faced challenges with infrastructure - the age of the building and the services required to maintain it, ageing air-conditioning which now needed to run 24 hrs a day, additional cleaning, and higher instances of maintenance being required. It was imperative that any issues with the building were reported immediately and ongoing support from Curtin Properties was required to ensure the building was able to cope with the ever increasing demands placed on it.

The Library also faced many challenges, the major one being able to provide properly trained staff. Training needed to be up to date and fluid to ensure we achieved best practice and any issues could be reported and/or resolved within a timely manner. Staff working in a Limited Services model were carefully chosen for availability, reliability, punctuality and responsibility as they work independently and unsupervised for the majority of their overnight shifts.

Safety and security of both staff and students were paramount to a successful operation. The Library needed to work closely with Curtin Parking and Curtin Security to ensure both staff and students were provided a safe, secure, supported environment in which to work and study. Designated parking areas were established for staff working overnight shifts and controlled access after 8.00pm for Curtin only staff and students was introduced. The relationship between the Library Student Assistants working overnight shifts and the support supplied by Security continues to be integral.

The challenges faced by staff in the Limited Service model were mainly around the student behaviour and lack of IT support overnight. Noise and food and drink needed to be strongly monitored and also in some instances intervention by Curtin Security was required. A policy was developed to manage sleeping students, as they were seen to be an issue. The model was strengthened by the creation and regular updating of overnight reporting templates enhancing communication between the staff working during Limited Services and “day” staff.

### **Since the introduction of 24x7**

With the library now open 24 hours per day during semester, it has allowed other areas to provide different types of student support outside of normal ‘business’ hours. We now currently have Student Mentoring and Study Support in the library. Curtin IT has plans to provide onsite support during full service hours in Semester 2 2015, hopefully expanding into the Limited Service hours and also during semester breaks. This will enhance the experience of staff working in Limited Services as they are required to provide first level support.

To add to the student experience and exploit the 24x7 model, changes to the Library Management System were introduced. In addition to automatic renewals, which help patrons keep their loans current, a new fines structure was implemented targeting high demand items only. Both of these changes further promote self-service options and allow patrons to borrow library materials overnight

Opening hours over the 2015 Easter break and ANZAC weekend were also reviewed, and a Limited Service model was trialled, opening the building for extra hours. The Easter opening highlighted issues around the returns of items over the 2 open days. This was addressed during the ANZAC weekend trial by offering self-service returns for high demand material. After reviewing the trial, this option will be implemented in Semester 2 2015

Our remote campus in Kalgoorlie also moved into a new building in March 2014 and has also been able to extend their hours to 2am each day, by using a Limited Service model staffed by Curtin Kalgoorlie Security.

### **And even further into the future**

- Further promotion of the model using Curtin's Official Communications Channel (which students must read), Faculty Librarians, the Student Guild and University Marketing
- Automatic payment of fines from client accounts, allowing immediate borrowing
- Improved methods of direct communication between clients and staff
- Further development of Self Service Options
- Providing expanded openings using Limited Service models during Semester breaks especially on week-ends.

### **Conclusion**

Initially, students were slow to respond to making use of the opportunities 24 x 7 offered, even though the request for an increase in opening hours had been a constant in University, Student Guild and Library surveys.

However, as a result of the most recent Curtin Annual Student Satisfaction survey, which was undertaken shortly after the introduction of 24 x 7, the satisfaction level with regards to the Library's opening hours rose from 88% in 2013 to 94% in 2014.

As the model continues to evolve we anticipate a further improvement in the Curtin Annual Student Satisfaction results.

### **References**

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<sup>1</sup> Google. (2015). Definition of evolution. Retrieved from: <https://www.google.com.au/#q=definition+of+evolution>

<sup>2</sup> Curtin University. (2014). Vision, mission and values. Retrieved from: <http://about.curtin.edu.au/welcome/vision-mission-and-values/>

<sup>3</sup> Curtin University. (2014). WA Institute of Technology. Retrieved from: <http://about.curtin.edu.au/curtin-history/wa-institute-of-technology/>

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<sup>4</sup> Curtin University. (c2012). 1972-1980 A concrete presence on campus. Retrieved from:  
<http://john.curtin.edu.au/40thanniversary/1972-1980.html>

<sup>5</sup> Curtin University. (c2012). 1992-2001 Bigger and better. Retrieved from:  
<http://john.curtin.edu.au/40thanniversary/1992-2001.html>