

Dave Palmer – Aston University Library Enquiries Team.

You're always bringing your work home with you! Running Aston University Library Enquiry Service from home.

Hi, I'm Dave, I have worked as part of Aston's Library service for 28 years and I'm the longest serving member of the enquiries team. We are a team of two managed by the Library Enquiries and Communication Manager.

The team usually works across 9-6 with support from a wide range of colleagues across the library team dealing with enquiries from Aston students and staff via email, phone and our live chat service. We were happily working in this way and then ...

March 2020 we entered the first phase of lockdown and began working remotely to offer the same services to staff and students minus face to face enquiries. Although this was extremely fast changing, we do believe that the switch appeared seamless to the students.

In one weekend we managed to take all of our enquiry services 'home' including email, live chat and also telephone enquiries - mainly helped by the Cisco Jabber software that enabled us to have the Library enquiries phone line installed on our laptops. Our homes now became our offices between 9 – 5 much to the delight of some family members... though maybe not all.

The team also managed the Libraries 3 social media channels and were quick to promote our services to students, reminding them that although we could not greet them in the Library, we were still available from our remote services. The Library also used the social media channels to promote the large selection of free electronic resources that were made available to Library users by suppliers during this first lockdown.

After the initial upheaval created by moving services online - and moving into the University vacation, we did start to notice a greater demand for live chat compared to previous years in what is usually a quieter period for communications with students.

With the easing of the first lockdown and preparations for the new academic year it was realised that the demand for live chat would continue to be high along with our other remote forms of contact as we planned to promote online enquiries as 'the' way to get in touch with us.

We created videos for students on our own YouTube channel that introduced them to many of our support services. Here is one of our recruits Anais explaining our Live chat service for first time users.

Our social media channels were also imperative in both promoting our remote services to students and communicating any changes to our services. We also found that interaction with both students and other University departments was greatly increased during the pandemic.

To spread this load we worked with another Public Services team responsible for face-to-face enquires and trained them in the mechanics and good practice of answering live chats. This was achieved using Microsoft Teams where screen sharing made it possible to explain the mechanics of the live chat platform, do test chats for training and also allow the new recruits to shadow us while on chats before going 'live' to take real student enquiries, making sure they had lots of practice before the start of term.

After the initial training period this broadening of the online chat team proved to be very successful, allowing members of the Public Services team to be timetabled in hourly slots to give backup to the Enquiries team. This gave the enquiries team an opportunity to focus on developing other areas including, developing support for our users like our FAQ knowledgebase, social media presence and increased interactions, working on upcoming induction for new students for the start of the new academic year.

And it is just as well we did ... Between Monday 21st September and Friday 2nd October 2020 the team received 658 student queries in a two-week period via live chat and on some occasions, we actually took over 100 live chats per day. This was also exacerbated by our new book collection service that was put in place, where we would receive book requests from students via email, process the requests remotely to send to a team of onsite staff to collect from the shelves, with students able to collect items from the Library foyer and working with our systems specialist we were able to start operating this service using the holds functionality with our LMS.

To create the sense of a support network that we would have had in the office we created an 'online chat support' group on Microsoft teams, where questions could be asked, and information relayed to the whole team. This was particularly helpful when the Library encountered any problems with it's services as any information or resolutions could be relayed instantly to the members of the group and alerts to Library users regarding issues with services could be quickly relayed via our social media platforms.

Online induction sessions were carried out in the first few weeks of term by the Library Subject Specialists and on each session the specialist would demonstrate our Live chat service to new students along with information on other ways to contact us and details of our social media channels.

Moving out of restrictions and reflecting on what we have learned over the 16 months...

The successes:

- The biggest achievement was the seamless transition the whole service and without any periods of downtime
- We successfully coped with the increased demand

Things we learnt

- How to facilitate remote training
- How to replicate support mechanisms in an alternative way
- Think about how you promote your services

Top tips

- Speak to your IT department to make sure you are using all the software available
- Think about you can create support networks for staff answering enquiries in the moment

Lastly, no-one could have imagined the impact that the various lockdowns would have had on our online services. Thankfully staff were both flexible and willing to step in to take on new challenges and responsibilities to keep our services available and will continue to maintain that flexibility.

