

Council of Australian State Libraries

Opening Hours Environmental Statement

The State, Territory and National Libraries provide services in an environment that has changed significantly during the last ten years, leading to major changes in operation, management and strategic planning. The opening hours of libraries have yet to be broadly considered within this new environment. Small adjustments have been introduced in response to local circumstances but the general framework of long opening hours across nights, weekends and public holidays remains closely aligned to a mid-20th century model.

The following environmental factors are currently impacting on opening hours and may drive more systemic changes in the future.

a. Opening Hours in the Broader Community

Libraries were traditionally open in the evenings and on weekends to cater for people outside their working hours and standard shopping hours. These were in the range from 8.00am – 6.00pm Monday to Friday with relatively few people working outside of these parameters. Most shops were open for only 3 hours on weekends, 9.00-12.00 on Saturday mornings. Since the early to mid 1990s this has radically changed. Retail centres are now routinely open throughout Australia from 9.00am-5.00pm on Saturdays and Sundays and many larger outlets have extended hours during weekday evenings.

Working hours have changed for many in the community, with longer working hours in most sectors, deregulation of the workplace and the introduction of new technologies. These changes flow on through service industries responding to demand and providing their services for longer hours. There has been a marked increase in part-time and casual employment, allowing employees more flexibility for balancing work and family life, as well as study or continuing education, though often at the expense of other employment conditions. New technologies also allow more learning to be undertaken away from the formal face-to-face teaching environment, giving students more flexibility and discretion in their study and information seeking.

Libraries can no longer aim to open to the public outside of working and shopping hours as these hours have diversified significantly.

b. Digital Libraries

Librarians are information specialists and an increasing percentage of information is now available digitally and can be accessed from anywhere via the internet. Library websites provide access to: digitised library collections; federated searching of library catalogues and collections; Australian and international databases of journal articles; subject pathways to websites evaluated for their authority and quality; document delivery services; live chat reference services; pre-ordering services for those intending to visit libraries; and information about the range of library services.

The use of library websites is growing steeply, with more than 35 million virtual visits to CASL Libraries websites in 2003-2004. As the digitisation of information increases and more collections become available through collaborative projects and federated searching, the use of these websites will increase.

Like online banking, the online use of libraries and other internet resources has impacted on the numbers of visitors through the doors of CASL Libraries (though libraries have not tried to discourage onsite visitors as the banks have done). The level of onsite use of CASL Libraries has remained either stable or dropped marginally during the past 5 years.

New technologies have also impacted on the length of time readers spend in the Library to access information. Readers can search databases onsite and email the results to themselves at home or work, pre-order items to cut down waiting times, or type extracts from non-digital resources in to a laptop computer so they are less likely to need long periods of time with the physical resource.

Libraries are now both physical and digital organisations and readers are balancing their actual and virtual use.

c. Community Perceptions

With the move to digital libraries, the community perception that on-site library services must be open for long hours has become out-dated. Digital libraries are available 24 hours a day and expanding rapidly. The sophistication of library websites is also growing, with the shift to simpler standard interfaces and clearer pathways to resources supporting increased self-sufficiency and promoting information literacy.

Currently, interactive live reference assistance is provided by the AskNow collaborative service across Australia for 10 hours per day, 5 days per week. Flexibility to expand this service, and to develop other online one-to-one interactive services, is a legitimate alternative to on-site opening hours.

The perception that a library building must be open for the community to access a library service is no longer valid.

d. Sustainability

CASL Libraries operate in a very tight fiscal environment, with the expectation of stakeholders that they will maintain the full range of traditional library services and undertake new initiatives in response to technological and environmental change.

As the digital component increases, new funding models must be developed to ensure sustainability. Infrastructure and recurrent costs are increasingly required to support digital services, and the capacity of current funding arrangements to adjust to this new environment is limited in many jurisdictions. The funding of digital services does not clearly mirror the remuneration models used for physical library services. Opening hours need to be open for review as part of the development of new funding arrangements.

New models for recurrent and sustainable funding must be developed to support libraries in the 21st century.

e. Structural Issues

CASL Libraries work within an industrial framework set generally by workplace agreements that have developed out of previous public service awards and conditions. The unions representing the employees are strong advocates for protecting these working conditions and improving salary levels. Management, staff, unions, peak bodies and professional associations are committed to advocacy and fair remuneration for the profession.

Employees receive penalty rates for working outside of traditional working hours and for weekend and public holiday shifts. Many staff depend on this additional income to supplement their salaries. Rosters for staff providing frontline services are based on a 5-day working week, Monday to Friday, with additional overtime rosters for weekends and public holidays, though libraries provide their services 7 days a week. This means that for every hour that a library is open on Sundays or public holidays, they could be open for 2 hours during the week.

The cost of opening on public holidays has become prohibitive for many CASL Libraries if they are to maintain weekday hours and continue to develop collections and digital services. Several CASL Libraries do not open on public holidays and some have reviewed how they provide frontline services during quieter periods weekly and annually and have redesigned these services to cut down staffing costs.

Opening hours impact on structural and workforce arrangements.

f. Flexibility

There are many factors that impact on what might be the optimum opening hours for CASL Libraries, and these can be different for each Library. The geographical location of the library, the surrounding buildings (shops, offices, tertiary education institutions, other cultural institutions, etc), influence the number of people likely to use the Library in the evenings, weekends and public holidays. The general safety of the area and the availability of public transport also particularly affect people visiting in the evenings.

Internal design of library buildings is also a factor for consideration. The layout of some might allow for nominated areas to be open for longer hours with a security presence only, such as exhibition spaces or study halls areas for students, while for others the opening of these spaces necessitates opening of reading rooms and the provision of some level of services. The presence of cafes and restaurants inside libraries need also to be considered.

Some CASL Libraries reduce opening hours and services during quiet periods of the year, such as December-January. At particularly busy times of year, usually the second half of the university semesters, staffing is increased to cope with demand, though within normal opening hours.

CASL Libraries are very aware of their importance as safe physical spaces, accessible to all and an essential part of the infrastructure that supports learning and social capital. They also collect and preserve the nation's documentary and digital heritage. Not all of the functions of CASL Libraries will ever be achievable digitally, physical access will not be superceded.

A more flexible approach to opening hours would allow libraries to target high demand services and peak times and to use limited resources most effectively.

g. Conclusion

CASL Libraries, like most libraries, are progressing quickly towards becoming two equally important and interlinked services - the digital library and the physical library. The expansion of the digital library requires time, resources and innovation and, as each development is made, the use of digital services grows. CASL Libraries are integrally involved in the creation, hosting and distribution of digital information. As stated in the British Library Code of Service:

“The British Library services two sets of users – those who currently use our services and those who will seek to use them many years in the future. We must balance our commitments to these two groups ...”

Developing the digital library serves current users and adds to the digital information resource and infrastructure for the future. This significantly changed environment impacts all aspects of CASL Libraries including opening hours.

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July 2005

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