Making Every Seat Count: Space Management in Libraries

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<th>New Review of Academic Librarianship</th>
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Making every seat count: space management at peak times in a university library

Abstract

This study explores the library equivalent of the *towels on deck chairs* phenomenon of students reserving library seats – the practice of leaving personal belongings unattended at a library study space for long periods of time, rendering the desk unavailable for use by others. It presents highly inefficient use of high value academic library space. This study measured the impact and effectiveness of a desk clearing intervention put in place to alleviate the space constraints caused by the practice. The components of this single site study were focus groups that explored student attitudes and motivations around desk reserving, a survey to assess user perceptions of the intervention and analysis of access gate data to identify behavioural changes following the intervention. Findings suggests that the phenomenon is a normal part of the student culture in the University library where this study is based. In addition to space constraints during busy periods, the sense of community, trust and peer support that users feel in the library appear to be contributory factors in desk reserving. The desk clearing initiative was introduced in response to user feedback, to maximise the availability of seats for the benefit of all users. It was successful in reducing the practice of seat reserving. Its impact was most noticeable in the early morning, where the practice of reserving seats for use later in the day disappeared. The initiative was welcomed by library users. The ‘Every Seat Counts’ campaign is now a regular part of the end of each semester in the THE ANONYMOUS INSTITUTION.
Introduction

Many academic libraries will experience the phenomenon of library users leaving belongings unattended at study desks for long periods of time, referred to in this study as ‘desk reserving’.

The library equivalent of towels on deck chairs is a practice that may be unproblematic during quiet periods. During busy periods however, it can infuriate library users, who themselves may be guilty of the same practice once they manage to find a seat. It can be perplexing for library staff when it appears that high value items such as laptops, phones and wallets appear to be abandoned for long periods. At its core however, the phenomenon is a space management issue. For libraries with large user populations and limited space, the practice represents highly inefficient use of reader spaces. Academic libraries reorganize collections to create varied reader spaces, however these efforts become less effective if library users can not find a study space because of desk reserving.

While the practice of desk reserving may be relatively common, standardised methods of dealing with the issue are not. Many libraries have seating policies indicating that belongings will be removed after a period. Implementing these policies in a consistent, systematic and fair manner can be difficult. Library staff can be uncomfortable with clearing belongings from unoccupied seats. There can be understandable reluctance around touching someone’s personal items, not to mention study materials, technology, storage devices and so on. Added to this, the concept of desk clearing may seem at odds with a library’s core ethos of providing comfortable and inviting spaces and an excellent customer experience not burdened by excessive rules and regulations.
By adopting a multi-faceted action research approach that employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study explores a common problem in academic libraries and proposes a solution that may have the potential to be replicated and tested elsewhere.

**Literature review**

This study is set within the wider literature on library space planning, efficient use of space and user experience of space in academic libraries. Current literature reflects the trend of collection footprints reducing throughout the higher education sector with 94.2% of academic libraries emphasising physical space as a strategic goal in their library plans. As print collections reduce, the academic library today is focusing instead on what Scott Bennett described as “a learning-centered paradigm”. During the transition from collection-centric libraries to learning-centered spaces, library space is freed up through shared resources initiatives, automated storage and retrieval systems, offsite storage, digitisation and electronic alternatives. Providing space for students, rather than just collections, is a pressing concern for library managers. Managing the demand for physical space and ensuring efficient use of space is increasingly important to fully support students.

Much of the literature on library space is devoted to how space is used and perceived by students and what activities they engage in while there. Studies include May and Swabey, Khoo and Dominguez which use a variety of methods to explore user activities in library spaces. May and Swabey report that student use of space in academic libraries is a complex mix of “noise, need and personal preference influencing experience”. Fatt and Su report that “an individual student also has different needs at different times” and proposes that at any one time a student may need collaborative, sanctuary, interactive and community space. Imamoglu and Gurel identified user preferences around seating such as preference for wide personal
space, seating near windows, seating near electrical outlets and network points. This THE ANONYMOUS INSTITUTION study focuses on the efficient provision of study spaces at peak periods of the academic year as exams approach.

Some literature refers to the space problems faced by libraries, and in particular to the issue around providing seating. Hyun Cha and Wan Kim in a study on student preferences for spatial attributes introduced the concept of ‘crowdedness’ as the third most important determinant for students, following ‘amount of space’ and ‘noise levels’. There is a gap in the academic literature regarding the concept of crowdedness and the ways in which to address space management relating to this issue.

Studies that address desk reserving at peak periods are sparse. Lynne Porat described initiatives at the University of St. Andrew’s in Scotland, the University of Exeter in England and Nanyang Technological University Library in Singapore that aimed to intervene in the practice of desk reserving. Experimental electronic solutions were prototyped at the Singapore Management University where proximity capacitive sensors were used to detect seat occupancy in real time. In this intervention, reserved desks are identifiable but the research does not discuss in detail the release of study spaces under the scheme. A further piece of research from Singapore Management University describes an instant seat-booking kiosk that seeks to address the desk-reserving problem at peak periods in the academic year. Media coverage of a university in China provided anecdotal evidence of the physical pressure placed on library spaces at peak periods that manifested itself in congestion inside and queues outside the library building. This THE ANONYMOUS INSTITUTION study explores desk reserving as a consequence of crowdedness and provides some real-world encouragement to practitioners as it tries to address the desk reserving issue at peak times, namely in the run up to exams.
Khoo, Rozaklis, Hall and Kusunoki \(^{18}\) provide an overview of research methods used to explore use of library space including observation, questionnaires, focus groups, mind mapping and interviews. This THE ANONYMOUS INSTITUTION study takes a similar methodological approach to use-of-space studies by Khoo \(^{19}\) and May & Swabey \(^{20}\) and uses multiple methods to explore both behaviour and user perceptions.

**Background**

There is a strong record of action research at the library at the THE ANONYMOUS INSTITUTION, based in the ANONYMOUS LOCATION. Data, in the form of customer feedback and usage statistics is systematically gathered, analysed and acted upon to enable evidence-based continuous improvement. For example, a study on the library’s evidence-based approach to dealing with ANOTHER LIBRARY MANAGEMENT ISSUE HAS BEEN PEER REVIEWED AND PUBLISHED.

The practice of desk reserving was highlighted as a particular frustration by library users in the 2014 LibQUAL survey. Of the 1,074 free text comments, 394 related to insufficient study space, not enough seats, belongings left on seats for long periods and a general sense of overcrowding. The library was built in (REMOVING THE YEAR SO AS NOT TO IDENTIFY THE INSTITUTION) to accommodate a population of 7,000 but by 2015 its population had increased to 13,000. A planned library expansion was delayed (REMOVING THE REASONS SO AS NOT TO IDENTIFY THE INSTITUTION) The practice of desk reserving was not new but appeared to become increasingly common and more of a problem for library users as space became more constrained.

The 2014 user feedback confirmed what library staff were observing with increasing regularity - a ‘morning rush’ for seats where queues formed at the library entrance for up to an hour before opening. Access gate data indicated that on an average day in the period approaching exams,
approximately 800 people entered the library when it opened at 8am and by 9am over a third of
these had departed. Observational patrols of study desks at the same time suggested that a sizeable
number of study spaces were occupied by belongings rather than people. It appeared that some
library users were coming to the library at opening time to secure a seat for use later in the day, and
then leaving to go to lectures or other activities.

Available evidence was gathered to explore the issue, diagnose the problem and develop a workable
solution. Following a literature search and a benchmarking exercise to identify practices in other
academic libraries, an intervention was put in place in the final five weeks of semester 1, up to and
including exams in 2015/16 to free up seats by clearing study spaces of belongings that had been left
unattended for a period of 30 minutes or longer. The activity took place from Monday-Thursday and
between the hours of 9am and 6pm. The desk clearing exercise focused on 534 of the library’s 1,100
study seats. It excluded the graduate reading room; the information commons bank of PC’s and the
group study areas and focused on desks in the quiet and silent study spaces in the main reading
areas. Desk clearing was conducted by student monitors who were carefully selected and trained to
ensure that the clearing was done in a fair, methodical and professional manner.

The process was a simple one. The student desk monitor would leave a note on occupied but
unattended desks, noting the time and alerting the reader that the desk would be cleared 30
minutes later. With a grace period of an additional 10 minutes, the monitor would return and
carefully place all belongings in a cardboard banker’s box with a lid which would then be placed
under the desk so that the owner could retrieve his/her belongings easily when he or she returned.
The seat was then free for use by another student. The initiative was repeated in the same period of
the spring semester of 2016 and is now a regular activity in the weeks approaching exams. The
resourcing of the initiative involved the purchase of 100 banker’s boxes, an outlay of approximately
300 hours of student labour per semester and some branding and promotional costs associated with
campaign t-shirts, printing and signage.
Methodology

This single site study used a mixed methods approach to explore the practice of students reserving library seats, and to measure the impact and effectiveness of the desk clearing intervention put in place to alleviate the space constraints caused by the practice. The components of the study were focus groups that explored student attitudes and motivations around desk reserving, surveys to assess user perceptions of the intervention and analysis of access gate data to identify behavioural changes in quantitative terms.

The purpose of the two focus groups was to explore the culture and motivations of library users who reserve seats. The first session was a pre-test and consisted of a convenience sample of seven students who worked part-time in the library and were known to library staff and to each other. The focus group convenor was one of the study investigators, who used the session to test the questions and talking points. The second focus group consisted of 12 anonymous participants and an independent and experienced convenor. These students were members of the 255 member University Class Representatives Council who responded to an email invitation from the convenor to participate in a focus group about the library. There were two graduate students and the remaining ten undergraduates were from different years, courses and disciplines. An incentive of a lunch voucher to the value of €10 was provided. The focus groups were structured around discussion points relating to library use, positive and negative aspects of the library, issues around desk reserving and leaving personal material on desks.

A desk-based survey was deployed during the second and third desk clearing periods, for the period of a week in the second semester of 2015/16 and again in the first semester of 2016/17.
The purpose of this survey was to measure user perceptions of the desk clearing intervention. It took the form of a short questionnaire disseminated to study desks and asked a single question ‘how is the library’s free a seat rule working?’ with the options of ‘well’, ‘no opinion’ and ‘not working’ provided. There were 187 responses to the first survey, which included 91 free text comments and 170 responses to the second survey, which included 69 free text comments. As the Graduate Reading Room was not included in the desk clearing operation, the survey population was almost entirely undergraduate and comprised a broadly balanced mix of 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students. Due to the nature of the dissemination at study desks in the library, the survey population was limited to those who were using the library during the desk clearing periods.

Access gate data was analysed to assess whether there was a change in patterns relating to numbers entering the library during the desk clearing periods as compared with pre-clearing periods. Data was extracted and analysed across three academic years. Five periods, each five weeks in length, were analysed. The periods of desk clearing in semesters 1 and 2 in 2015/16 and semester 1 in 2016/17 were compared with the corresponding periods in the previous year 2014/15, where no desk clearing took place.

Results

Focus groups

The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the culture and context around the practice of desk reserving. The output was analysed by identifying themes that emerged in the discussions. All participants, bar two who only studied at home, acknowledged that they regularly leave belongings unattended on library desks for some periods. All saw it as a common and widespread practice and part of communal studying. The general lack of seating, overcrowding
and difficulty securing a space in the library, particularly as a semester progressed, was a recurring theme. The reasons for leaving belongings unattended at desks varied and included taking breaks of varying duration, securing a seat for study at a later point and for storage, to avoid ‘lugging material around’ on campus. Time emerged as a theme, where reserving seats saved time, avoided time wasted queueing or walking around the library for long periods to find a seat later in the day.

A sense of trust emerged as a theme – trust that the library was a safe environment in which to leave belongings unattended and in particular trust in the shared community of fellow students. An example of a comment that captures this – “it is your peers, in the sense that there is trust and understanding as we are all on the same wavelength, a kind of understanding that I won’t take their laptop, they need material on that laptop.” Two students who had previously studied in larger universities speculated that this “unwritten rule of trust” may not exist in a larger size institution. A sense of fellowship among peers emerged in the first group when students reported operating systems with friends and classmates to share or pass on a library seat by alerting each other when leaving the library, or to post on Facebook when there are seats available in the library.

**Survey data**

The purpose of the desk surveys was to assess student perceptions of the desk clearing initiative. Free text comments were also provided and were coded into categories. The surveys demonstrated that students were broadly supportive of the desk clearing initiative.
The majority of comments either endorsed the scheme or suggested ways that it could be improved. Only a very small number of comments (five) indicated dissatisfaction with the principle of desk clearing.

Summary of survey comments Semester 1

2015/16 (total = 91)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive: endorsements of the desk clearing scheme</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time: the 30-minute time allowance was too short</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforcement: that respondents didn’t see desks being cleared</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative: disagreed with the desk clearing scheme</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General: comments relating to other library services</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not fair: regular library users should not be included in scheme</td>
<td>3</td>
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</table>

Satisfaction levels were higher in the second survey following a number of changes to the system that were based on user feedback from the first survey:
Specifically, the maximum time allowed to be away from desks was extended from 30 to 45 minutes, enforcement was intentionally more visible and the campaign was more clearly branded as the ‘Every Seat Counts’ campaign.

**Summary of survey comments Semester 1 2016 / 17 (total 69)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>endorsements of the desk clearing scheme (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>the 45-minute time allowance was too short (and in two instances, too long) (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>disagreed with the desk clearing scheme and criticised the contribution of uniformed security guards to the desk clearing (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>comments relating to other library services (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not fair</td>
<td>regular library users should not be included in scheme (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The positive endorsements were illustrated by comments such as these:

“*It is really a nice rule. I was trapped once and now will never do it again*”

“*Great effort at a busy and stressful time of the year. Thank you*”

“*Works well, much easier to find a seat now. There isn’t a load of empty seats left unattended for ages being wasted*”
Access gate data

The focus groups and surveys provided insights into behaviour and perceptions from the users’ perspectives. Access gate data was analysed to assess whether there was a change in patterns relating to numbers entering the library during the desk clearing periods as compared with pre-clearing periods. Analysis showed that once the library reached full occupancy on any given day there was no discernible difference in patterns between desk clearing and pre-desk clearing periods.

Differences did appear however in entry patterns between the hours of 7am and 9am, where the numbers waiting for the library to open and entering in the early hours, significantly reduced in the desk clearing periods.

The chart above illustrates this before-and-after difference by comparing the busiest points across three years - the Tuesday and Wednesday of Week 12, the last week of lectures before exams in semester 1. Early morning entrants to the library in 2014 when no desk clearing took place were much higher than in 2015 and 2016 when the initiative was in place. The data confirmed what was observed on the ground - the option of leaving belongings on desks to
secure them for later in the day was no longer a possibility, therefore early morning queues disappeared.

A further finding from the access gate analysis was that the total number of visitors to the library dropped by 5% in the period when the desk clearing was first introduced in 2015 as compared with 2014 pre-desk clearing, causing some concern that the initiative might be dissuading users from coming to the library.

Occupancy levels returned to semester norms in subsequent desk clearing periods thereby removing the concern that management felt regarding library visits being adversely impacted by the desk clearing initiative.

**Discussion**

The practice of leaving belongings on library desks appears to be a normal and accepted part of the student culture in the University library where this study took place, while at the same time being an acknowledged frustration for all. At {THIS INSTITUTION} it was linked to the concept
of crowdedness. Insufficient space in a library catering to an expanding student population is undoubtedly a contributory factor, most particularly as the semester progresses. The sense of trust among peers that emerged in the focus groups seemed particular to the library, with participants agreeing that they would be far more likely to leave high value items in the library than elsewhere on campus. This trust in peer networks may raise difficulties for libraries when it comes to providing a safe and secure space for library users and managing user expectations around this.

Ultimately, the desk clearing initiative described in the study was aimed at maximising the availability of seats for the benefit of all users. This study indicates that this intervention was successful in reducing the practice of seat reserving and thus increasing the availability of seats for use. The early morning queues outside the library at peak periods disappeared with the intervention. The initiative was welcomed by library users.

The decision to address the issue of occupied, unattended seats at the THE ANONYMOUS INSTITUTION Library was not taken lightly. With some caution library management was compelled to take action following the volume of comments from library users in the 2014 LibQUAL survey about difficulties in finding seats. There was uncertainty about how students would react to having their belongings removed and concern that the intervention might damage the valued relationship that the library had fostered over many years with the UL student community.

A number of factors contributed to the success of the scheme, the sharing of which may be helpful for other academic libraries dealing with this issue. Firstly, the initiative was widely communicated to the university community before commencement. Meetings with the officers...
of the Students’ Unions enabled input and support. For the first two days of each period, the
desk clearing was carried out in a ‘pseudo’ manner, where desks were not actually cleared but
library users were alerted that the initiative was about to start. Employing students to do the
desk clearing allowed a focused and systematic approach that would not have been possible
with otherwise busy library staff. The student monitors were carefully selected using criteria
such as customer focus and positive attitude. They were trained in how to handle people’s
belongings, particularly laptops and other devices, and in how to handle potential conflict, with
clear steps to refer upwards if required. In the three periods of desk clearing that have occurred
at the time of writing, there have been no conflict situations that have required referral to
library staff.

The desk surveys demonstrated that the scheme was welcomed by library users and provided
students with an opportunity to improve the scheme further. The main feedback highlighted in
the comments was a sense that the 30-minute allowance before a desk was cleared was not
sufficiently long to allow for breaks, lunch and single lectures. This led to an extension of the
period to 45 minutes in the third desk clearing period in semester 1, 2016/17.

There was a view reflected in a small number of comments that the rules were not being
enforced because users did not see any desks being cleared. In some ways, this was due to the
success of the initiative. Because the initiative was carried out systematically, it meant that
students stopped saving seats very early in the project, thus the number of desks cleared was
relatively small. However, from the user perspective, seeing is believing and this finding led to
an instruction to student monitors to be more visible to library users, by wearing ‘Every Seat
Counts’ t-shirts and carrying boxes during frequent patrols – even if they were not actually
clearing any desks. The effectiveness of the desk clearing may be lessened if user perceptions are that it is not being enforced.

A small number of comments indicated a sense among some regular library users that the initiative unfairly advantaged the less frequent visitors who came to the library for the first time in the pre-exam period. One such comment illustrates this “the half an hour policy is an OK idea but I feel it is benefitting students who don’t use the library as often as other students. For instance, I have been using the library all year. I go to class and come back, I can’t do that now because people who haven’t used the library all year want to use it now.”

The 5% drop in the numbers visiting the library during the first desk clearing period, as compared with the same period in the previous year, caused concern that the initiative may have deterred students from coming to the library. However, this was not borne out in the second and third desk clearing periods. The authors investigated possibilities such as access gate down times or other events during the period that might have led to a drop in occupancy levels, without success. The reason for the 5% drop in semester 1 2015/16 is unclear. It may have reflected an initial reaction to desk clearing, however the qualitative comments from the desk surveys indicated that students were reacting positively to the initiative. They understood the rationale for the initiative, saw the benefits of it and did indeed acknowledge that it was easier to find a seat in the library.

A final recommendation for libraries considering implementing such a solution is to plan some form of assessment of the initiative. When the scheme first began library staff expected mixed reaction from library users. In fact, there were no complaints, no compliments and generally no discernible feedback from the student body. It was unknown whether the initiative was
welcomed by library users or whether students were being put off by the new system. Contemporary social media sites, including the anonymous Yik Yak, were checked regularly and provided encouragement but not in sufficient number to give a clear picture of user perceptions. The surveys, focus groups and access gate data triangulated in this study provided strong evidence of the success of the initiative.

Quotes from social media

No more empty threats...Glucksman (Library) playing hard ball

First year I’ve been able to get a seat in the library in week 12, ever in 4 years

To be fair the library actually listens to students and tries to do things to help. Fair play to them!

Limitations of the study and areas of further research

Anecdotally, the issue of desk reserving in libraries is commonly experienced, yet it is not a well-researched one. The constraints of this study lie in the limited generalisations that can be made from a single site study [REMOVING THE PLACE SO AS NOT TO IDENTIFY THE INSTITUTION]. A similar approach taken in a different setting may have different outcomes, where variables such as physical space, cultural diversity, student type, institution size, etc. may have unknown impacts. There may be other effective interventions dealing with desk reserving which are not reported in the literature. The initial benchmarking exercise that the authors engaged in to investigate solutions suggested other interventions including the provision of lockers for personal belongings, electronic seat booking systems and quick stay zones where users would immediately lose their seat if they left it for any reason.
The sense of trust and peer support that students in the focus groups reported feeling in the library more than elsewhere on campus merits further research. While space and noise are dealt with in the literature, the issue of crowdedness needs further investigation to understand its impact on library user behaviour and perceptions. There may be scope for further research to gain greater understanding of the demand for library space particularly during peak times in the semester. While there is a body of literature exploring what people do when they are in the library building, few studies consider how usage differs across an academic year or focus particularly on the period approaching exam time.

Conclusion

This study explored the library equivalent of the towels on deck chairs phenomenon of students reserving library seats. It measured the impact and effectiveness of a desk clearing intervention put in place to alleviate the space constraints caused by the practice. The qualitative data in this study suggest that the practice of leaving belongings on library desks to reserve space is a normal and accepted part of the culture in the University library, particularly in the context of crowdedness. The sense of community, trust and peer support that users feel in the library appear to be contributory factors in desk reserving. The acceptance of one’s own behaviour is somewhat at odds with the irritation felt by individuals when they see other people reserving study desks, particularly at peak periods. While a short break may be acceptable, a long absence becomes a frustration to others searching for seats. Knowing the tipping point between short and long absences, and knowing how long a desk has been unattended presents quite a challenge for library staff.

Staff at the THE ANONYMOUS INSTITUTION Library introduced the desk clearing initiative in response to user feedback but with some trepidation, concerned that the intervention might
damage user perceptions of the strong commitment to the customer that is at the heart of the library’s services. This study found that this was not the case. The impact of the desk clearing initiative was most effective in the early morning, where the practice of desk reserving essentially disappeared. Library users welcomed the initiative. User perceptions of the scheme were largely either positive or suggestive of how the initiative could be more effective. The ‘Every SeatCounts’ campaign is now a regular part of the peak study period at the end of each semester at the THE ANONYMOUS INSTITUTION. The simple solution provided library management with an effective space management tool. Without the capacity to create new space {REMOVING THIS SO AS NOT TO IDENTIFY THE INSTITUTION}, the desk clearing initiative ensured that existing space was utilised with maximum efficiency.


16 Lau, Aldred Wen Yang, Tan, Eileen Yi Lin, Lee, Jo Xin, Thiow Ern Lim, Joshua, Lee, Shu Wei, Dimian, Adel, Ishak, Yuyun Wirawati and Ong, Vincent. 2015. Improve Space and Manpower Utilisation. In


Tables, Charts and Graphs

Chart 1: Survey 1, Semester 1 2015 / 16

Every Seat Counts Student Survey 2015/16

<table>
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<th>Working Well</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
<th>Not working</th>
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<tr>
<td>57%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>16%</td>
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Table 1: Comments from Survey 1, Semester 1 2015 / 16

First survey comments (total = 91)

37 Positive: endorsements of the desk clearing scheme
26 Time: the 30-minute time allowance was too short
15 Enforcement: that respondents didn't see desks being cleared
5 Negative: disagreed with the desk clearing scheme
5 General: comments relating to other library services
3 Not fair: regular library users should not be included in scheme
Chart 2: Survey 2, Semester 1 2016 / 17

Table 2: Comments from Survey 2, Semester 1 2016 / 17

<table>
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<tr>
<td>27  Positive: endorsements of the desk clearing scheme</td>
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</table>
Graph 1: Morning Visitor Numbers before and after Every Seat Counts

![Graph of Morning Visitor Numbers](image1)

Graph 2: Overall Library visitor numbers before during and after Every Seat Counts

![Graph of Overall Library Visitor Numbers](image2)