

# May I Borrow a Stapler? Is This All Students Ask at the Service Desk in a University Library?

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### Article abstract

**Objective** – The objective of the study is to increase the knowledge about what questions students ask at the library desk and what the purpose is of their use of the desk. Our focus has been on the physical meetings with the students. The aim is to contribute to the discussion on the future development of the library service desk.

**Methods** – We recorded questions asked at the desks to explore how students use the library service desks. The recording, where library staff sorted questions into predefined categories, took place over four weeks between the years 2017–2018.

**Results** – Our recording showed that 63% of the questions asked at the library service desks were about loan services, document delivery, and access to physical and electronic collections. Practical things such as opening hours, lost and found items, and the location of the group study rooms, accounted for 16% of questions. Questions about information technology (IT) made up 8% of questions. Finally, the results showed that 8% of the questions from the four weeks of counting were counselling and guidance questions, and 2% were about literature lists, reference management, and reference management tools. We found more questions about counselling and guidance in the spring weeks and more practical questions in the fall. We did not find any clear connection between the number of questions and the size of the branch libraries.

**Conclusion** – By conducting this study, we have learned more about why students use the library desk. Our study shows that students come to the library desk to ask about a lot more than just borrowing staples. The results from the study will inform the development of the library desk service going forward.





*Research Article*

**May I Borrow a Stapler? Is This All Students Ask at the Service Desk in a University Library?**

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**Abstract**

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Practical things such as opening hours, lost and found items, and the location of the group study rooms, accounted for 16% of questions. Questions about information technology (IT) made up 8% of questions. Finally, the results showed that 8% of the questions from the four weeks of counting were counselling and guidance questions, and 2% were about literature lists, reference management, and reference management tools. We found more questions about counselling and guidance in the spring weeks and more practical questions in the fall. We did not find any clear connection between the number of questions and the size of the branch libraries.

**Conclusion** – By conducting this study, we have learned more about why students use the library desk. Our study shows that students come to the library desk to ask about a lot more than just borrowing staples. The results from the study will inform the development of the library desk service going forward.

## Introduction

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) is the largest university in Norway today. NTNU specializes in science and technology, and offers a variety of programs of professional study, along with broad range of academic disciplines. NTNU University Library is a public scientific library, with branch libraries located on several campuses. The main objective of the library is to support research and education, and students and staff are its primary users. The branch libraries differ in terms of collection size, whether they have special collections or not, and how many faculties and departments they provide services to. Some of the branch libraries have only one employee while the largest ones have up to 15. There are service desks at all branch libraries. Most of the libraries have only one desk where patrons can ask a variety of questions about circulation, access to electronic and print collections, literature searching, reference management and tools, IT, and more. Questions are answered at the desks or forwarded to specialists in the library. One of the larger branch libraries has two desks, one for circulation questions and one for counselling and guidance questions.

For some years, the library desk has been the subject of discussions, valuations, and musings

about what to do with it, how to staff it, and how to organize it. The fight for attention is hard, and other areas, such as digital content, new user demands, web-based services, and new self-service solutions, have for quite a long period been the centre of attention in libraries in Norwegian institutions of higher education. At the same time, the anecdotes about the library desk are very much alive and may sound like: *"I just get questions about printers and group study rooms", "The students don't make use of the desks during the examination period", "The only thing they ask for at the desk is to borrow the stapler"*. We began to wonder if the anecdotes reflect today's reality. We have extensive experience working at the service desks and these descriptions do not accurately describe what we have seen.

There are several international studies on topics related to the library desk service, recording, and categorizing of inquiries. (Gerlich & Berard, 2007; Henry & Neville, 2008; Katz, 2002; LeMire et al., 2016; Lenkart & Yu, 2017; Radford & Connaway, 2013; Ryan, 2008; Warner, 2001). But so far, there is a lack of Norwegian data in the field. To increase our knowledge about what really goes on at the library desk in a large Norwegian multi-branch university library, we launched a project called TREFF (the "Desk-

project")<sup>1</sup> in 2017. The National Library of Norway provided financial support for the project. The start of this project was to map the questions received at the desks in all the university's branch libraries. Our focus has been on physical meetings with students, and we describe and discuss the process and results in the following article.

## Literature Review

To increase knowledge about what students ask at our university library's service desks, we analyzed their questions. To facilitate the analysis, we sought out literature about similar recording projects in other libraries. We had two objectives for our literature search. The first was to find a suitable recording form. The second objective was to explore the findings in previous studies, to place our study in a wider scholarly context. Because our project included all branch libraries, we needed the recording method to be as simple as possible. In our search, we did not come across any Norwegian studies, but we discovered several international ones.

According to the literature, questions asked at library desks are assigned different classifications as a means of recording the activity. Katz (2002) used the traditional categories for classification of reference questions: direction, ready reference, specific-search questions, and research. In 2001, East Carolina University was in the process of changing their reference desk organization to a "single point of service", and they saw a need to re-examine how they record reference transaction statistics (Warner, 2001). Warner created a classification system based on the resources required to answer the question: non-resource-based (Level I), skill-based (Level II), strategy-based (Level III), and consultation (Level IV). One of the benefits of using this system was that it identified, as early as possible in the encounter, which library staff member should answer the question. The findings from

the collection of statistics using the Warner classification showed that 80% of the questions from the new service desk fell into Levels I and II and could be answered by students or technicians, while 20% fell into Levels III and IV and would usually be referred to a reference librarian. Henry and Neville (2008) collected questions received at the reference desk and tested both Katz's resource- and time-based categories and Warner's resource-based categories. The results showed that the directional or non-resource-based questions accounted for 50% or more of the total, the skill-based or ready reference questions 30-40 %, and strategy-based or specific search questions less than 10%. They concluded that Warner's system appeared more applicable, but also that value can be added if time-of-day and time-of-semester activity is included. In a holistic approach to evaluating in-person, email, and chat reference transactions, LeMire et al. (2016) considered Warner's and Katz's scales and the READ scale. The latter is a six-point scale developed to record the skills, knowledge, techniques, and tools used by the librarian during a reference transaction. On this scale, level 1 questions require the least amount of effort and knowledge, while level 6 require the most effort and are time-expended inquiries. Time dedicated to the transaction is also recognized in the READ scale (Gerlich & Berard, 2007).

LeMire et al. (2016) chose not to use any of the existing scales because they tended to pre-assign higher value to in-depth, subject-oriented reference questions. The authors believed that, "...even 'simple' question types can give patrons valuable help and can turn into complex information searches" (p. 231). In addition, the existing scales do not consider questions in new areas, like open-access publishing, maker spaces, and so on. The codebook developed by LeMire et al. (2016) consists of nine broad categories: Library Information and Policy, Circulation/Borrowing/Reserves, Research and

<sup>1</sup> TREFF means "meeting" in Norwegian

Reference, Locate Materials, SFX/EZProxy/Off-Campus Access, Technology, Print/Scan/Copy/Duplication, Feedback and Other. The results of their evaluation of reference desk, email, and chat transactions in a shared service point showed that 22% of the questions were in the category Library Information and Policy, 18% were in Circulation/Borrowing/Reserves, 16% in Research and Reference, 15% in Locate Materials, and 17% were in the print, technology, feedback and other categories. More detailed classifications have also been developed. A study of the cost-effectiveness of staffing a traditional reference desk in a university library divided 6,959 reference desk transactions into four major categories: directional, look-up, reference, and technology (Ryan, 2008). The questions came in person, by phone, or by email. The reference category was subdivided further into eight categories: catalogue search, citation help, database help, guide to correct database(s), personal knowledge or referral, quick internet, research, and serials solutions. The results from Ryan's study (2008) showed that 36.3% of the questions were non-informational (did not refer to the collection) or were 'machine' transactions (printer and copy issues). Directional questions about the collections accounted for 15.4% and quick lookups for 9%. Of these questions, 12.4% were about technology (excel, logins, passwords, network), 26.8% were in the reference category, of which 11% were research questions.

Radford and Connaway (2013) analyzed live chat and instant messaging (IM) questions and used the categories of subject search, ready reference procedural, no question, holdings, research, inappropriate directional, and readers' advisory. The results showed that subject search question frequency had sunk and that there was a shift towards more procedural questions. In their study, Lenkart and Yu (2017) examined 66,638 in-person, email, and phone transactions from 5 specialized and 2 general reference service points at the University of Illinois

Library. The researchers found that 30.9% of the total number of transactions were directional, 18.1% were about library policies and services, 22.8% were questions about library materials and 6.3% were inquiries for research assistance. In addition, 2.5% were ready reference and 11.6% were related to things like printers, scanners, software and so on.

## **Aims**

In this study, we aimed to increase our knowledge about what questions students ask at the library desk in a large Norwegian university. What is the purpose of the students' use of the desk? Our focus has been on physical meetings with the students. The research question guiding this study has been: What questions do the students ask at the library service desks in a large, multi-branch library at a Norwegian university? By mapping the desk activity and investigating students' inquiries at all branch libraries, we hope to contribute to the discussion on the future development of the library service desk.

## **Methods**

To understand how students use the library service desks, we recorded the questions they asked at the desks. We started out searching for a suitable recording form, but the forms we found in the literature were too complex for our project. For instance, we could not use forms that included considerations about the complexity of each question or time spent to answer (Gerlich & Berard, 2007; Katz, 2002; Warner, 2001; Ryan, 2008). Because our recording process would include different staff members in several branch libraries, we needed the form to be as simple as possible. The more variables the greater the chance of inaccurate recordings, which could lead to errors in the data. For this reason, we decided not to use any of the forms presented in the literature and instead developed a new recording form for this study (Appendix).

From the literature review, we found inspiration for subject categories (LeMire et al., 2016; Lenkart & Yu, 2017; Radford & Connaway, 2013; Ryan, 2008), but we chose to use terminology that would fit into the context of a large Norwegian university library and that our colleagues at the service desks would be familiar with. We decided to use the following categories: Collection and Access, Counselling/Guidance<sup>2</sup>, Citing and Referencing, Loan, Practical questions<sup>3</sup>, IT questions, and Other questions<sup>4</sup>. Although the form had to be simple, like Henry & Neville (2008), we chose to include time-of-day as a parameter, as this would add valuable information without complicating the recording process. The time periods we used were: opening hours until 12:00p.m., from 12:00p.m. until 3:30p.m. and from 3:30p.m. until closing time.

The project members reviewed and tested the first draft of the recording form and the subject categories. We also carried out a pilot at a couple of branch libraries in advance of the first recording week. The form worked well, but more clarifying examples were needed under some of the categories. We pointed out that questions about the location of study rooms, auditoriums, cafés, and so on were to be recorded in the Practical category. We clarified that the Other category should be used for questions about exams, grades, and other similar topics.

We observed five hours' worth of interactions between students and desk staff in four of the branch libraries during the first recording week. The observations served as a validation of the recording forms and confirmed that the forms worked well. Therefore, no further adjustments were needed. Eventually, we found a coincidence of types and distribution of

questions in the observations and in the recording weeks.

Student activities vary throughout the academic year. In some periods, they are busy with exam reading, while in others, they are writing assignments. To get a good distribution of the recording weeks throughout the academic year, the first recording took place in November 2017, the rest were conducted in 2018 (February, April, and September) so that these different phases could be compared.

The recording of questions was conducted by the desk staff in all 14 branches of our university library. We notified colleagues ahead of the recording weeks and gave clear instructions on how to record. We stated that only questions from students were to be recorded (including students from other universities). Since our study dealt with physical meetings with students, questions by email or phone should not be counted. The libraries used one form per day and recorded all individual questions in the correct category. There could be several questions per inquiry and all questions were recorded. The students were notified of the recording activities by placards placed on the desks. Questions were recorded in the predefined categories with one tally mark for each question. We used paper forms and collected the forms after each recording week. The total results were transferred into Excel for further processing.

## Results

In this study, in-person questions from students at the library service desks were collected through four different weeks spread throughout the academic year from November 2017 to September 2018. During this period, a total of

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<sup>2</sup> Questions about writing assignments, searching literature, etc. In-depth questions that usually requires more time to answer.

<sup>3</sup> Questions about group study rooms, opening hours, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Questions that did not fit into any of the other categories, e.g., questions about exams or administrative matters.

Table 1  
Percentage (Number) of Questions per Category

	Collection and Access	Counselling/ Guidance	Citing and Referencing	Loan	Practical	IT	Other	Total
November 2017	18% (479)	5% (125)	1% (33)	41% (1094)	23% (600)	9% (226)	3% (80)	100% (2637)
February 2018	17% (370)	8% (180)	2% (35)	50% (1074)	13% (274)	6% (134)	4% (85)	100% (2152)
April 2018	19% (445)	11% (269)	4% (89)	45% (1055)	13% (296)	6% (138)	3% (69)	100% (2361)
September 2018	21% (532)	7% (189)	1% (25)	40% (1003)	17% (421)	10% (241)	5% (122)	100% (2533)
Total	19% (1826)	8% (763)	2% (182)	44% (4226)	16% (1591)	8% (739)	4% (356)	100% (9683)

9,683 questions were recorded in the different 14 branch libraries. Table 1 shows questions per category recorded in all 14 libraries in percentage (number). The results show that the largest number of questions was related to the physical collections and revolved around what is found in the library room.

Divided into 14 libraries, a total of 9,683 questions corresponds to 35 questions per library per day.

The distribution of questions in the different categories was quite stable throughout the four weeks. Loan was the category with the most questions, with 44% on average for the four weeks. This was followed by collection and access with 19%. Figure 1 shows the distribution of questions in the categories for all four weeks in total.

The two categories with the greatest variation were Counselling/Guidance, with 5% in the recording week in November 2017 and 11% in April 2018. There were also more questions in the Practical category in the two recording weeks in the fall (23% and 17%) than in the other two weeks (13% both).

We found no large variation in the type of questions on the different days of the week. Figure 2 shows the distribution of questions according to days for all four weeks in total. The average shows slightly fewer questions on Fridays (17%) and slightly more questions on Wednesdays (22%) than on the other days.

In this study, we recorded questions in three different time periods each day and looked at how the questions were spread throughout the day. We did not find any large variation in the different time periods. The pattern showed a comparatively even number of questions between opening hours and 3:30p.m. and less from 3:30p.m. until closing. Figure 3 shows the distribution of questions in the different time periods.

To maintain anonymity, we were prevented from breaking down results by library. However, we did not find a clear connection between the number of questions and the size of the branch libraries. Some of the small- and medium-sized branch libraries had a relatively larger number of questions than the biggest libraries. Measured in questions per library employee, it was also not the largest libraries that received the most questions. To give one

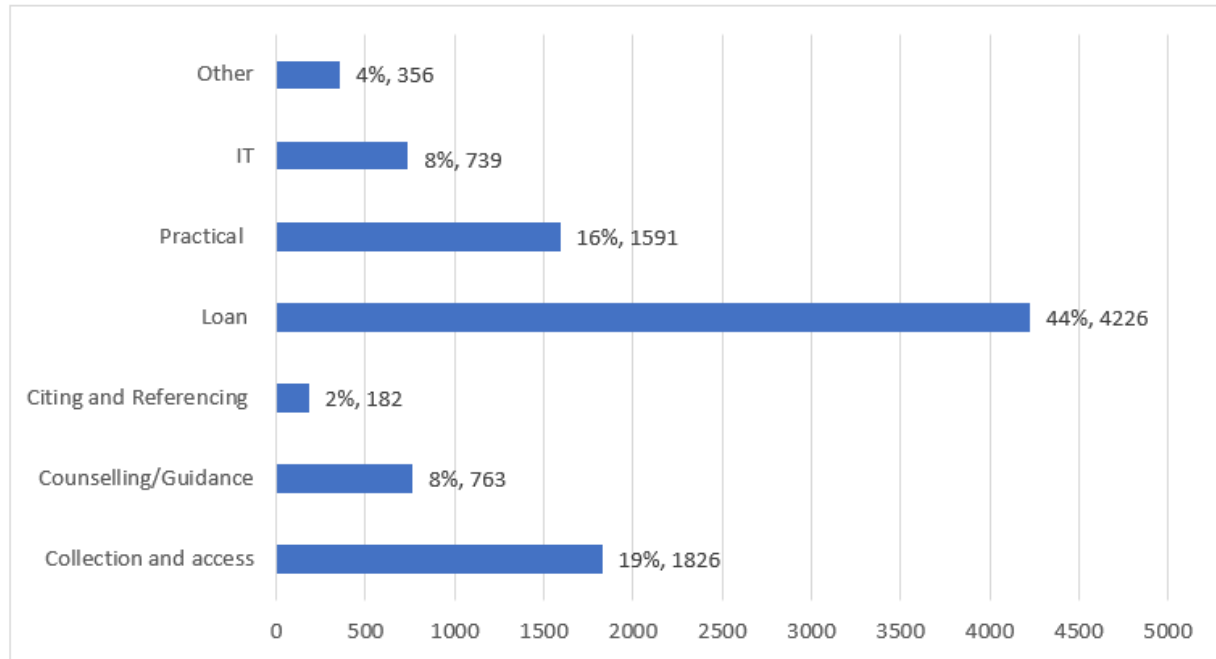


Figure 1  
Questions per category in total for all four weeks.

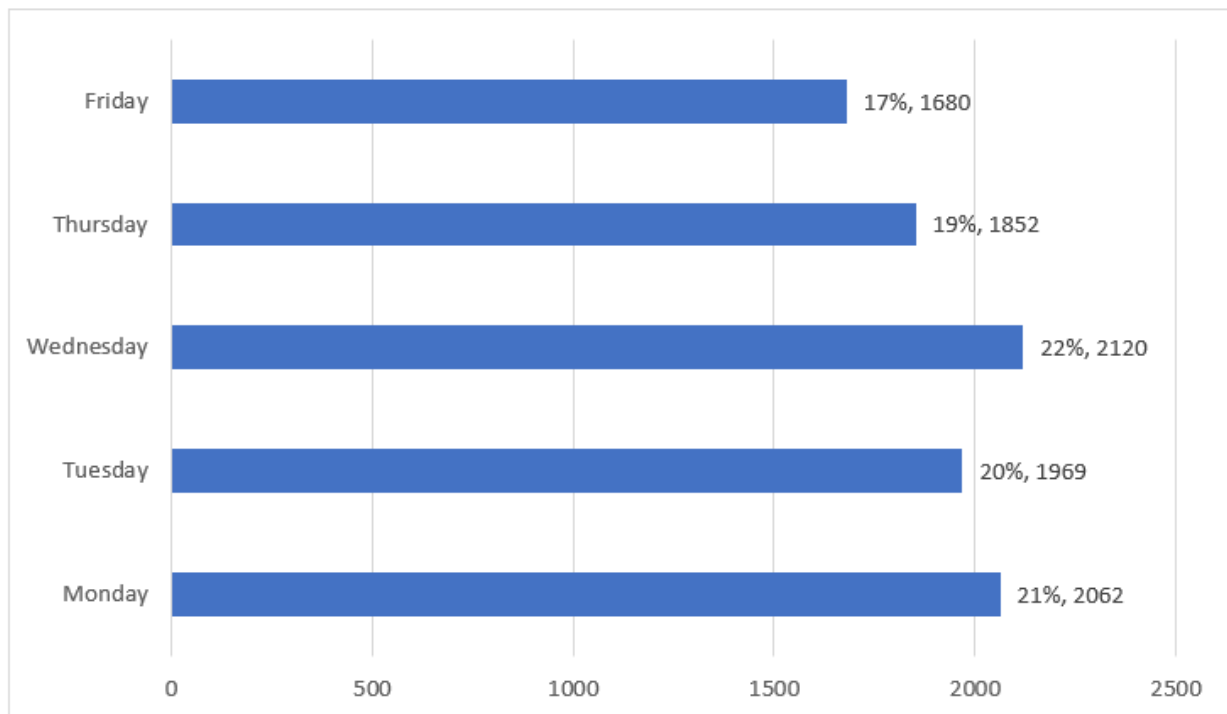


Figure 2  
Questions per day of the week.



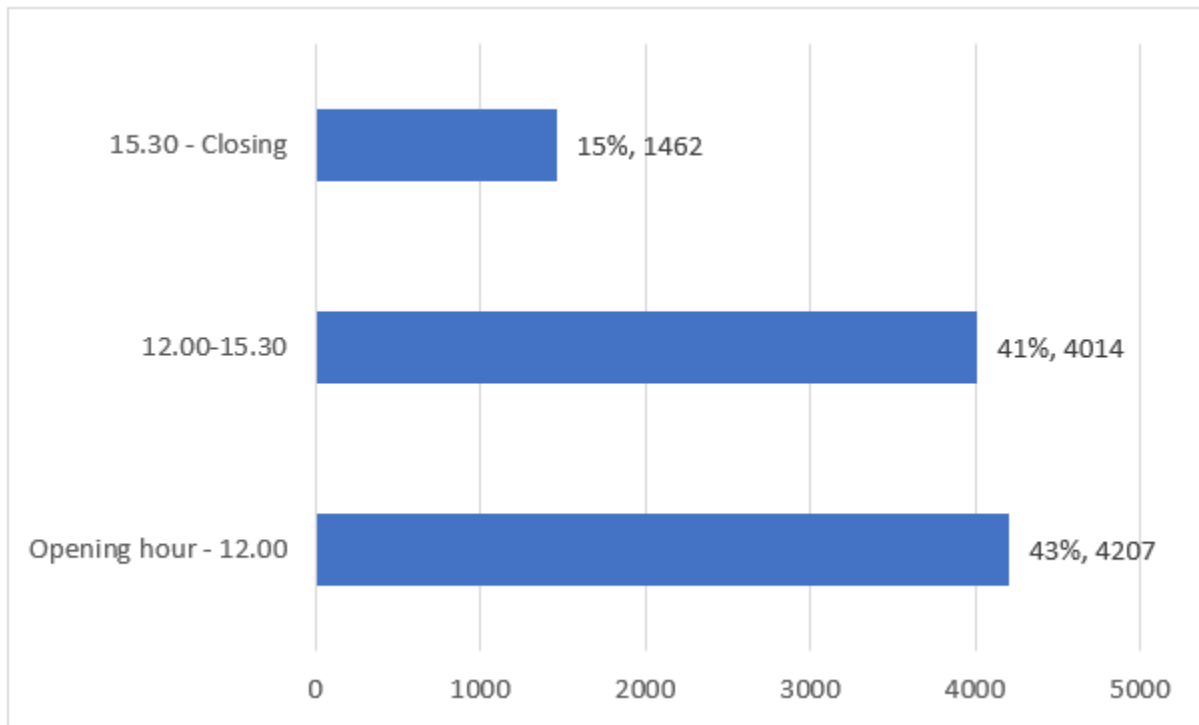


Figure 3  
The spread of questions throughout the day.

example, one of the smallest branch libraries that cover health and social sciences had 439 questions per employee, while one of the largest libraries had 89. We will discuss possible explanations for this in the discussion section.

### Discussion

Our study shows that students ask about a lot more than just borrowing staplers at the library desk. In fact, 44% of the questions were about loan services and document delivery; 19% were about physical and electronic collections and how to access to them; 16% were about practical things, such as opening hours, lost and found items, and the location of the group study rooms; 7% of the questions were about IT. Finally, the results show that 8% of the questions from the four weeks of counting were counselling and guidance questions and 2% were about literature lists, reference management, and reference management tools.

The recording of students' questions was conducted by the desk staff in all 14 branch libraries at the university. In a previous study (Kesselmann & Watstein, 1987), it turned out that as many as 45% of questions were categorized incorrectly. We have no reason to believe that the percentage is that high in our study, but there are of course several possible sources of error: some may have misunderstood the content of the categories, forgotten to record questions, recorded inaccurate or double-recorded questions and so on. The fact that so many different staff members were involved in the recording is another possible source of error. We must, therefore, assume that there may be some errors in our data. Since both the recording form itself and the recording process were thoroughly quality checked before we started the recording, nothing indicates that major systematic errors were made.

It is interesting to compare our study with other similar ones (Le Mire et al., 2016; Lenkart & Yu,

2017; Ryan, 2008). Admittedly, we cannot compare the studies directly, both because the categorization of types of questions varies somewhat, plus some of the studies, unlike ours, included email and chat transactions. Nevertheless, we can still see some similarities. Our findings show that 19% of the questions were in the collection and access category, while the corresponding percentage in Le Mire et al.'s study (2016) was 15% (category named Locate materials). In Lenkart and Yu's study (2017), 6.3% of the questions were inquiries for research assistance. The corresponding percentage in our study was 8%.

These findings are about similarities, but we also find differences. Lenkart and Yu (2017) found that 22.8% were questions about library materials, while our results showed 44%. Ryan (2008) found that 12.4% of the questions were about technology (Excel, logins, passwords, and networks) and in our study the corresponding number was 8%.

The comparison with international studies is interesting, but it is also worth comparing our findings with other Norwegian studies due to a common cultural and organizational context. Several university libraries in Norway are currently running projects about the service desk, including a mapping of questions. Unfortunately, little has been published so far. In an unpublished study from a project conducted in 2016, researchers at Oslo Metropolitan University found that 53% of the questions fell into the categories of Procedure and Collection. This corresponds roughly to the two categories in our study, Collection and Access and Loans, for which the percentage is 63%. There is also a similarity between these two studies when it comes to the category Counselling/Guidance questions in our study and the similar category Subject search in the unpublished study: 8% and 12.4%, respectively. So how can one interpret this similarity in results and the fact that the percentage of Counselling/Guidance questions seems to be relatively low? We do not have previous data on

the number of Counselling/Guidance questions in Norwegian academic libraries. However, from Norwegian official government statistics, we do know that in recent years the volume of courses and individual guidance sessions by appointment has increased (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2019a). Could it be that a great deal of the Counselling/Guidance questions are channelled through these services instead of the library desks? The question is whether this practice is optimal or whether one should, to a greater extent, use the desk as an educational tool in such a way that students are encouraged to also use the desk for counselling and guidance questions. Maybe that would be a more resource-efficient way to utilize the library desk service. However, it is important to conduct more studies on these issues.

The two categories with the greatest variation between the recording weeks were Counselling/Guidance and Practical. The Counselling/Guidance category makes sense because the students submit their bachelor's and master's theses in the spring and therefore will have more questions on this topic. There were also some more practical questions in the two recording weeks in the fall (September and November) than in the other two weeks. The reason for this is somewhat unclear but could be connected to the fact that new students usually have more practical questions in connection with the start of the school year.

We did not find any obvious connection between the size of the branch library and the number of questions asked at the desk. It was not the case that the larger the library, the more questions were asked. In fact, at one of the smallest branch libraries, 439 questions per employee were asked, while at one of the largest, there were 89 questions. In the study, we have not investigated the reasons for this, but we have some suggestions. We ask ourselves if a higher share of printed material generates more questions at the service desks? Although the proportion of electronic literature is increasing, printed literature is still widely used in

Norwegian university libraries (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2019b). Moreover, our own experience of working for several years in libraries within different subject areas, have shown us that there are differences in library use between disciplines. We have not found any Norwegian research to back this, but we believe that the findings in our study reflect that assertion. Another reason may be that some libraries have a stronger position among staff and students than others do and therefore are used more. This could be due to a greater proximity in smaller professional environments, making it easier to contact the library desk.

Our recording form, with few parameters and the recording process itself, worked well for this study, particularly considering that so many employees were involved in the data gathering. The subject categories were general enough to make the question recording easy and at the same time they were well suited for our analysis. The recording method can be recommended for other libraries, especially big multi-branch libraries.

Even if the recording form was simple, time-of-semester and time-of-day activity was admittedly taken care of. However, unlike other studies, we did not record subcategories (Ryan, 2008) or time use (Gerlich & Berard, 2007). Our findings showed a low percentage of Counselling/Guidance questions, 8%, but these questions are extra time-consuming. A possible follow-up study could use a recording system that includes the time aspect, for instance the READ scale (Gerlich & Berard, 2007). Other variables that can provide richer data material and can be considered in further research are questions in new areas, like open-access publishing, maker spaces, and so on (LeMire et al., 2016). Further research may also include user groups other than students and other communication channels besides the personal meeting at the desk.

Another interesting point, which we did not address in our study, is that simple, practical questions can lead to other, more complex ones. Once the dialogue between staff and student has been established in the personal meeting at the desk, it may be easier for the student to ask even more questions and more complex and time-consuming ones. One short question may reveal a deeper need for information. In our experience, this happens at our university library, but we do not know how often and how the mechanism works. On the other hand, we also did not investigate what kind of follow-up questions the library staff asked students who approached the desk. The lack of these perspectives is a limitation in our study but are well suited for subsequent studies. Even though our study aimed to broaden the knowledge about one library, our own, this is a limitation and later studies should include other libraries as well.

What significance does our study have for further practice? The results are still discussed at the University Library, but so far there have been no changes in the desk staffing. Recording of questions asked at the desks will continue after the project period and will be carried out twice a year in the future. Most important is that awareness of the various aspects of desk service seem to have increased. This awareness had led to more discussions about desk service issues in both formal and informal meetings. Also, a forum has been established for presentation and discussion about desk related issues, like dissemination of the library's electronic collections, access to special collections, and so on.

The purpose is to develop competence to guide users. Our study will, in combination with other research results and a longer time of recording, provide the library with a better basis for further development of the desk service.

## Conclusion

In this study, we examined students' use of the service desks in all branch libraries at a large university. During four different weeks throughout the academic year, we mapped desk activity. We sorted the questions asked in the personal meetings at the desk into predefined subject categories. Most of the questions were about loan services, document delivery, and use of and access to physical and electronic collections (63%). In total, there was little variation between the categories from week to week, but we did find some differences. For example, there were more Counselling/Guidance questions in the assignment and exam period in the spring and more questions of a practical nature in the two autumn weeks.

Results indicated that there was no obvious relationship between the branch library size and the number of questions asked. It seems that some study programs have a greater need for library services than others. This is one of the factors to consider when dimensioning and organizing the desk service in the future.

Through this study, we have gained more knowledge about the purpose of students' use of the service desk. These findings from a large Norwegian multi-branch library is a unique contribution to the body of data that already exists internationally about the topic. In our study, we have developed a recording methodology, which we think is well suited for other large, multi-branch libraries. If more researchers use the same recording methodology, it will make it easier to compare findings between libraries and between countries in the future.

Our newly gained knowledge has been and will continue to be used for further development of the desk service at our university. Interesting themes for subsequent studies could be to investigate the consequences of different types of follow-up approaches for the fulfilment of

student information needs. Other ways to broaden our knowledge could be to include other user groups as well. Finally, other communication channels other than the personal meeting at the desk would be of interest for future researchers.

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## Appendix

The TREFF-project, registration of questions at the library desk, week xx (Monday [date] – Friday [date] [year])

### Library:

### Date:

Use one registration form per day. Register each *question* in the right category (**there may be several questions per inquiry**).

One tallymark per question. REGISTRATE QUESTIONS ONLY FROM STUDENTS. Do not register questions asked via email or telephone.

Categories	Opening Hours - 12.00	12.00 - 15.30	15.30 – Closing Time
<b>Collection and Access (Digital and printed collections).</b> E.g.: do you have <title>, Where do I find..., How do I get access...			
<b>Counselling/Guidance (Reference questions)</b> E.g.: do you have material about..., is this a scientific journal article, how to search, where to search...			
<b>Citing and Referencing</b> E.g.: how to cite, make bibliographies, use reference tools (not technical questions about installing programs = IT-questions)			
<b>Loan (loan, library card, request)</b> E.g.: loan/return, help with self-check, questions about due date, resource sharing, collecting requested material, claims, return receipt, logging into databases			

<b>Practical questions (rooms/buildings/equipment)</b> E.g.: where to find study rooms, cafes, auditoriums ..., complaint about bad air, what are the opening hours, where to deliver lost property, borrow a stapler etc., where is the printer			
<b>IT-questions</b> E.g.: laptop printing, printing problems, internet access, questions about installation and use of software			
<b>Other questions (register a tallymark and write down the question).</b> E.g.: administrative matters			