

# Overnight study facilities

Students on a residential campus - such as the University of the Western Cape (UWC) - often face serious problems when they want to study outside library hours. Residence halls in South African universities are usually noisy and overcrowded and even if there is a desk or a table available, what do you do if your roommate or worse, room-mates want to play the radio, or have a couple of drinks with friends, when you have an assignment due early the next day?

In some parts of the United States, university and college libraries stay open until the early hours in an attempt to solve this difficulty. Some even close as late as 3 o'clock in the morning, but the extra costs involved in paying library and security staff and in keeping a skeleton service going all night, are extremely high, especially if only one or two students or faculty members are actually using the facility at any given moment.

Another common solution is to keep lecture halls or classrooms open for student use. But again, these facilities are not custom-built for the purpose of individual study and students who need to spread out papers and books on a table may find that the individual space allowed for note-taking during a lecture is far from adequate for private study.

The university library at the University of the Western Cape features a custom-designed, twenty four-hour, seven-days-a-week study room on level two of the main library building. This is an attempt to address, although not solve, these difficulties. The main library closes at ten o'clock at night from Monday to Thursday and at half past five on Fridays and is open until five o'clock on Saturdays. On Sundays the

staff rest. But the twenty four-hour room is just what its name implies.

This is an innovative measure and it is unknown if such a facility is available at other African universities.

The room, which is known as the overnight study room, is entered through a separate, sign-posted entrance to the right of the main doors of the library and although there is an interconnecting door inside, to the library's main ramp, this is normally kept closed. The room is large and airy and is simply furnished with large tables and rows of chairs. There is seating for approximately 150 students.

Admittedly, the facility is far from a perfect solution. For one thing, there is no library service at all, students must bring any study materials with them and cannot gain access to the library collections, even though they are in the library building and even when the library is open.

Surprisingly, although the main library faces serious problems with noisy students on various levels, the overnight study room is normally extremely quiet, with perhaps a subdued murmur from a corner as fellow-students consult each other over a tricky point. And this is despite the fact that there is no librarian or other staff member on permanent duty in the hall. Security is provided by campus control, who visit the room to carry out spot checks at irregular intervals. So far, this seems to have been effective, despite serious safety problems on other parts of our campus.

Clearly, our students recognise that the overnight study room is a place where silence rules. Why they don't feel the same way about the main library is

something that has not yet been figured out.

UWC, located on a remote campus outside Bellville, has over 14 000 students, many of whom live in Cape Town, Stellenbosch, or in other communities all over the Peninsula, far from campus. The overnight study facility is clearly not much use to them, especially over weekends when they are off campus and may want to do some studying.

Cape Town is a city which is relatively rich in library facilities, in South African terms and increasing numbers of UWC students and others are taking advantage of the open-door policy of public, national and research libraries in their neighbourhoods for study purposes, as they are fully entitled to do. This can cause difficulties, simply because of the numbers involved and really shows up the inadequacy of our library structures relative to the total size of the population.

We are currently examining the possibility of supplementing the overnight study room with an undergraduate law reading room, in the law faculty, which might provide short loan services during the day and a similar open space at night, especially for law students, of whom we have well over a thousand. Problems of overcrowding are not going to go away and our graduates prove by their success that they can indeed study well in the most difficult circumstances. □

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