



## **A day in the life of the head of an LRC Andrew Barrow**

**With 25 years' experience as Science Librarian at the University of Portsmouth and a stint as Chief Librarian at the Arabian Gulf University College of Medicine in Bahrain, Andrew seemed the ideal candidate to set up a new learning resources centre (LRC) in Oman.**

**We catch up with Andrew almost two years into his role at the Ministry of Defence's Military Technological College (MTC), where a day in his life is certainly very different from a day back in the English seaside town and port of Portsmouth.**

It's 5:15, and I am awoken by the sound of chirruping crickets. Not the crickets outside my bedroom window – of which there are plenty – but the very punctual and vocal group that have taken up residence in my iPad. Never having been much of a morning person, this gentle alarm is set early enough for me to have a few minutes gathering myself together before getting up. Today is the middle of the working week (which is Sunday to Thursday in Oman as in all the Gulf States) so, as on every work day, smart dress is required: a shirt and tie, dark trousers and black shoes.

Although I am entitled to accommodation on the MTC campus – my Civilian Officer Grade equates, unbelievably, to a Colonel – I have chosen to share a villa some 15 kilometers away, simply to put some distance between work and my temporary home. Back home in Portsmouth, I am not breakfast's greatest fan, but here I habitually stop to enjoy a simple breakfast (a few samosas, tea and orange juice) at a small coffee shop near the MTC. I also feed a nearby colony of increasingly plump feral cats, and once they have started on their breakfast I feel that I can have mine. Breakfast over, I drive to the MTC, arriving not long after dawn.

I am fortunate to have an allocated, shaded parking space just a short walk from the MTC's four-storey Central Administration Building, one half of which is occupied by the LRC. This is a real bonus. Even in the blast-furnace-like heat of summer when an outside temperature of 56°C is not unknown, I can walk from my car to the building without breaking sweat. Today the temperature is a pleasant 20°C and it feels almost cool.

Although term-time opening hours are 7:30 – 22:00 on weekdays, the LRC is already open and, once inside (we have ID card-activated entrance and exit gates), I check our 3M Digital Drop Box to see if any books have been returned using it. A monitor indicates whether any returned books are 'exceptions', books that have been reserved or trapped by the library management system (LMS). Today there is just a single book in the bin: J K Rowling's *A Casual Vacancy*, borrowed from our Recreational Reading Collection, a collection of books built entirely from generous donations and the odd charity book sale. RFID-based self-service circulation systems are becoming common in Oman but the LRC is as yet the only one in the country to have a digital drop box. Still quite novel so, as yet, rather under-used.

'Today there is just a single book in the bin: J K Rowling's *A Casual Vacancy*'

Next, I check that the three 3M SelfCheck RFID kiosks are working. They always are, as the system is very reliable, and today is no exception. Lastly, I tidy the Reception Desk and switch on and log-in its two laptops; these are used for borrower registration and will serve as backup circulation terminals should the SelfCheck kiosks ever fail.



Ground Floor duties over, I make my way floor by floor to my top-floor office, checking that the dedicated OPAC terminals (there are three on each floor) are switched on. This slow ascent of the building also provides me with the opportunity to tidy the chairs and tables ready for the start of the working day. The four floors of the LRC are home to nearly 300 hard-wired 'thin client' workstations, as yet the only cluster of workstations in the MTC. Being also blessed with relatively fast WiFi, the LRC is very popular with students as a place to get online with their laptops, whether for academic purposes or otherwise. I am hopeful that soon I will be given

a member of staff whose sole job it will be to care for the workstations and the four heavy-duty printers (which also scan and copy), and to liaise with the MTC's IT and Systems Team. This person will also have responsibility for the day-to-day maintenance of our LMS, Cirqa from IS Oxford.

'the LRC is very popular with students as a place to get online with their laptops, whether for academic purposes or otherwise'

Once in my office, I put the kettle on, make a cup of coffee and then sit down to open my e-mails. The volume of e-mail I receive is far smaller than when I worked in the UK. Why? Possibly for cultural reasons. E-mail is still not widely accepted as a means of communication among the MTC's and the Ministry of Defence's Omani staff. Often, having sent an e-mail requesting that something be done or an item be ordered, I will be rung up and asked to 'send a letter', my e-mail having been deemed to carry insufficient weight by itself for its contents to be acted upon. I have been here now for almost two years and I feel that I have achieved very little, although other expatriate librarians seem to think I have achieved a lot.

At 8:00, the Deputy Librarian for Technical Services, who had called in at 7:30 to wish me a cheery 'A'salaam aleykum', reports that the Reception Desk staff cannot access Cirqa. I try to do this from my laptop and find that I can't either. They need to register the last few students of this year's intake, so I phone the MTC's Head of IT and Systems who agrees with me that this needs sorting urgently. His team is immediately put on the case and he promises to keep me informed of progress with the problem. He and I are among the longest-serving members of the MTC, and we are next-door neighbours as well, so we have a good working relationship. I appreciate how hard-worked his team are and he appreciates

that I only bother them if the matter is very important, which a crashed server certainly is! By 9:10, the IT team has come to the conclusion that the Cirqa server must be restarted. When acquiring the LMS, I asked for it to be purchased as a hosted service. Even though the annual cost of hosting was very small, my request was refused and I live with the consequences of that refusal almost every day. But someone has smiled on us and at 9:20, the IT Team rings me to tell me that Cirqa is now running again. I return to dealing with my e-mails and soon have opened and filtered them all. There is nothing urgent among them so I spend the next couple of hours chasing books that have been ordered, doing (or checking) the cataloguing and classification of new stock and chivvying the teaching staff to get book orders from them. Late in the morning, a member of the MTC's virtual learning environment (VLE) team rings to ask me to confirm that I am happy with the workstations on Floor 1 and Floor 2 being used for an end-of-trimester online exam in a week's time.

'I live with the consequences of that refusal almost every day'

And, like colleges everywhere, the MTC is bedevilled by meetings. Pretty soon, it's nearing 13:00 and my Outlook Calendar flashes up a reminder that I need to attend the Steering Committee of the Department of Civil Engineering & Quantity Surveying to be on hand to answer any library-related questions. At least there will be biscuits and Arabic coffee, the inevitable and welcome accompaniment to all meetings. (Coffee and biscuits there were; questions there were not.)

'At least there will be biscuits and Arabic coffee'

The shelves have been designed to hold 15,000 books and the book stock has grown to almost half that size in just a year. Thankfully, we will soon be able to supplement local resources with many others drawn from the huge range of e-journals, e-books and databases available through Portsmouth University Library, the university that is validating the MTC's awards. In early January, work will begin on creating an LRC section in the MTC's Moodle VLE to guide students to and around these resources. Authentication is currently by Shibboleth using usernames and passwords e-mailed to the MTC students a few weeks ago, although I understand that Portsmouth are migrating from Shibboleth to OpenAthens in the spring of 2015.

Once students here have completed a General Foundation Programme, which consists mainly of improving their English, they move onto the Portsmouth-validated part of the course: a three- or four-year course in aeronautical, civil, marine or systems engineering. It is planned that most students will exit after the third year with a Diploma in Higher Education, and the top 20% will be given the opportunity to continue their studies to gain a BEng Honours degree in their chosen branch of engineering. By 14:00, the departmental meeting is over, and I head back to my office to get my car keys and collect the three English-language Omani newspapers that I get each day. Heading for home, I stop at an American fast food restaurant for a burger and chips. This is a luxury I allow myself only rarely – at least that's what I tell my wife. Back at the villa, I watch some TV, work on my weekly e-mail letter to my family, and then I venture out for some Arab street food (which I love) for supper. Returning to the villa, I turn on the local classical music station (*Oman Classics*) and am tucked up and in the arms of Morpheus by 21:00.

Tomorrow night is a special night, the one night of the week when I get to fulfil my boyhood dream of managing a cinema. Because our students are confined to campus during the working week, the LRC, in conjunction with the English Department, lays on a weekly movie – 'Movie Nights @ the MTC' in the MTC's Exhibition Hall. Tomorrow night's offering: *Godzilla*, the 2014 version.

'I get to fulfil my boyhood dream of managing a cinema'

Oman, in so many respects a modern state, is sadly a library-poor country with no school libraries, no public library system and only one academic library approaching Western standards, so building a modern LRC anywhere in the country was always going to be a challenge, and in truth it has been a somewhat greater challenge than I expected. The MTC's students and its military administrators have little experience of modern libraries

14 and I regularly have to fight battles that I should not have to fight. As a Yorkshireman, I am keen to see that the MTC's money is spent wisely, but sometimes the lack of understanding about what I am doing, indeed what I could be doing, is very frustrating. But putting the frustrations of work aside, Oman is a very agreeable place in which to live, blessed with epic scenery, interesting wildlife and wonderful geology – ask any geologist about Oman's ophiolites!

Andrew may be contacted at [barrowa@hotmail.com](mailto:barrowa@hotmail.com)

**Article copyright: © 2015 Andrew Barrow. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use and distribution provided the original author and source are credited.**



Barrow, A, A day in the life of the head of an LRC, *Insights*, 2015, 28(1), 11-14; DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/uksg.167>

Published by UKSG and Ubiquity Press on 5 March 2015