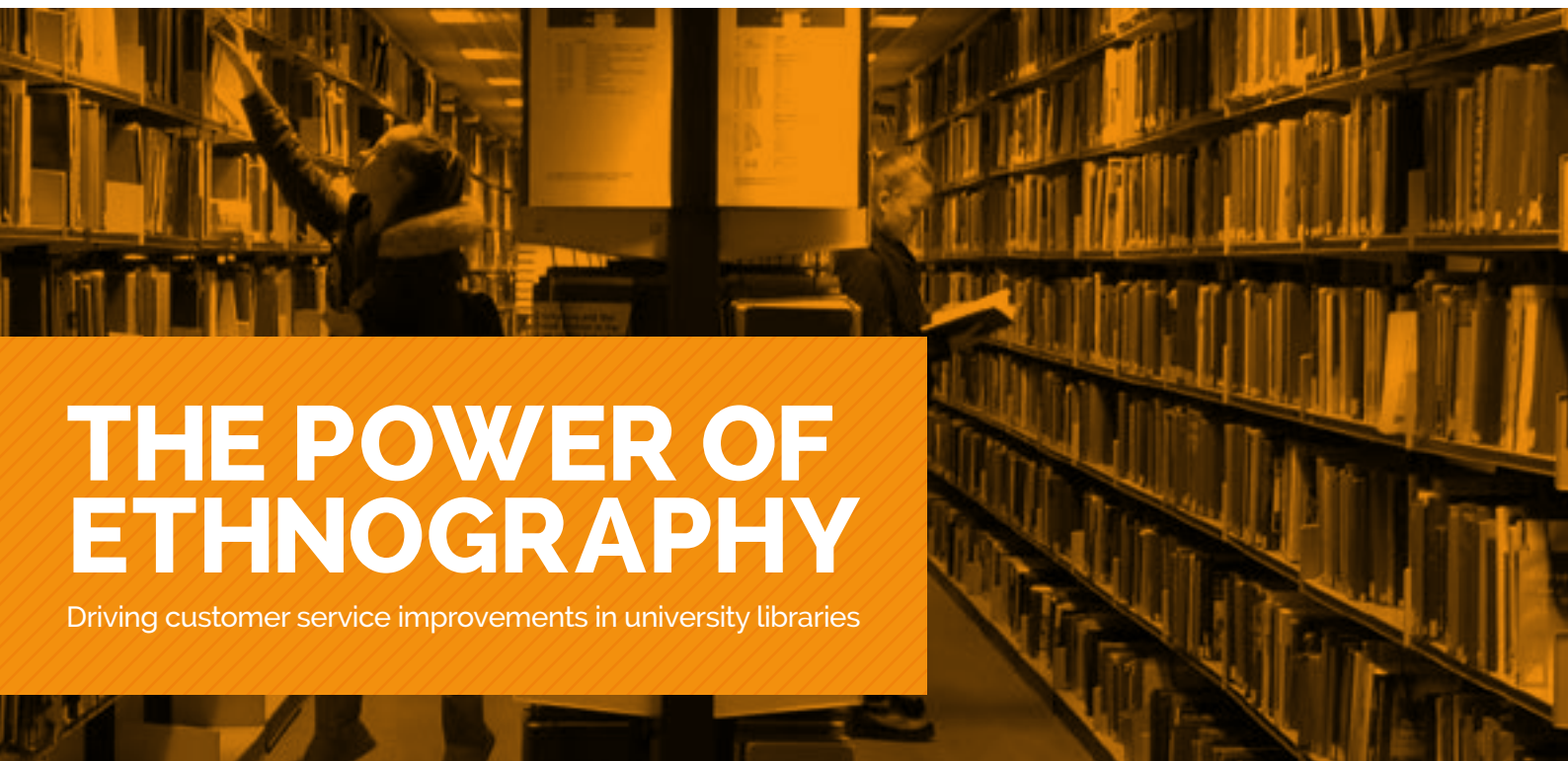


The logo for alterline, featuring the word "alterline" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The letter "l" is stylized with a vertical orange line extending upwards from its top, and the letter "i" has a small orange dot above it.

alterline



# THE POWER OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Driving customer service improvements in university libraries

# Who are Alterline?

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We are a strategic research consultancy helping our clients understand the people that matter to them, and using that understanding to solve problems, innovate and drive change.

We work closely with many universities and appreciate the challenges and opportunities they face. Our partnerships regularly go beyond the research and extend to the planning and implementation of the resultant changes, both tactical and strategic.



# The power of ethnography

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Developed from the academic discipline of cultural anthropology, ethnography is the study of people in their natural environment. It is increasingly being used by market researchers because it helps us to understand what people actually do rather than what they say they do.

We often deploy this technique in libraries to investigate how students use space and how they interact with each other, staff, and the environment.

This booklet identifies some of the key themes and challenges facing university libraries by using photographs and quotes from some of our work.

▮▮ **Ethnography literally means 'a portrait of a people'. An ethnography is a written description of a particular culture – the customs, beliefs, and behaviour – based on information collected through fieldwork. ▮▮**

Marvin Harris – Anthropologist



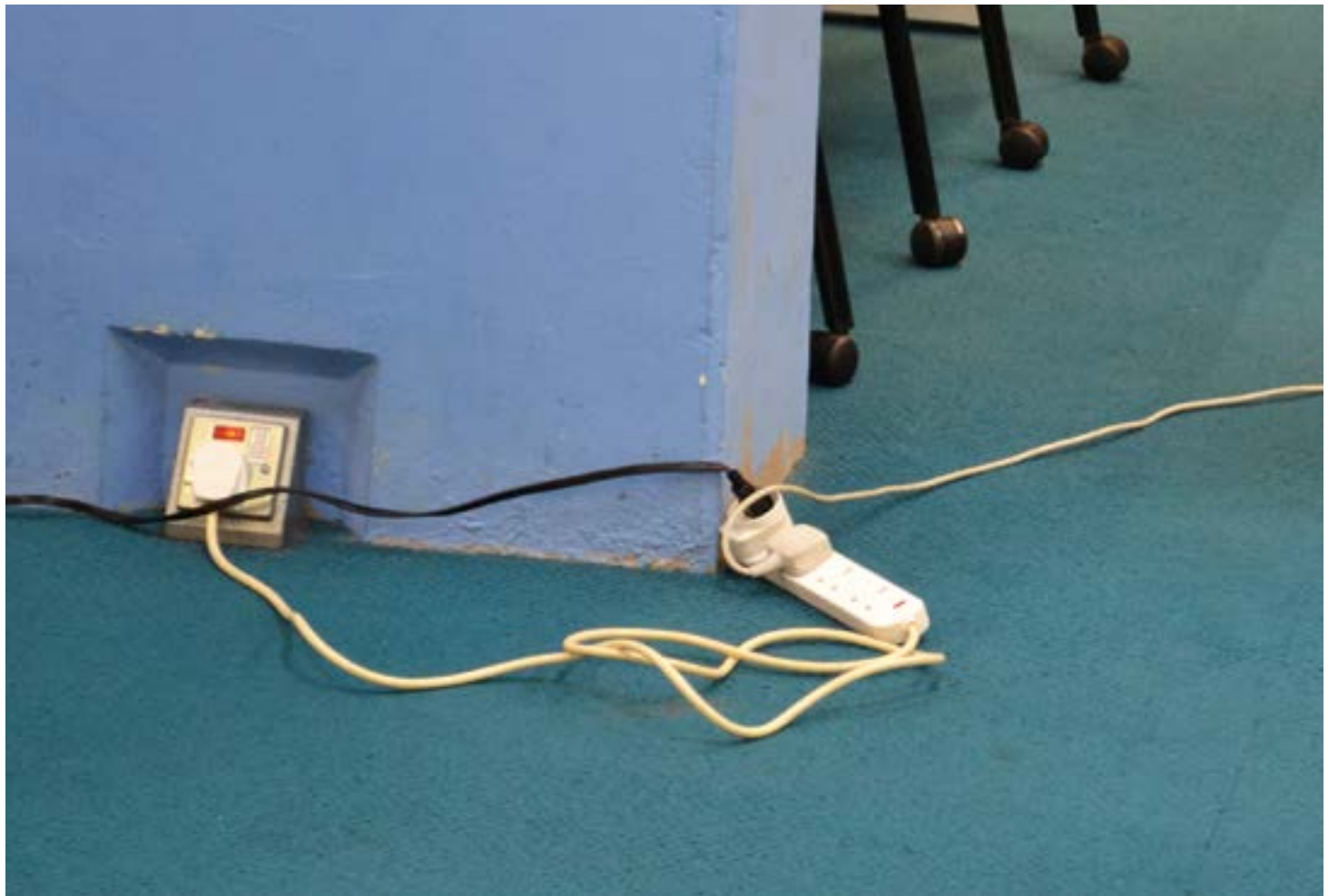
# How can we make the best use of limited space?

“

The library is usually very busy  
and is a difficult place  
to find a space to work.

”





# Is the space designed to meet students' needs?

“

There's a massive lack of plugs  
in the library, it's  
a nightmare.

”







# How can we provide the right mix of spaces?

“

It's a comfortable place where you can work both individually and in groups. It caters for all personal preferences!

”





# Can students find what they're looking for?

“

I couldn't find the book, although  
the library  
catalogue shows that  
there is one copy  
available out of seven.

”



A photograph of a cluttered desk. In the foreground, a sign is attached to the edge of a wooden desk. The sign has a blue background with yellow text. The desk surface is light brown and covered with various items: a laptop, an orange coffee cup, a water bottle, a notebook, a purple lanyard, a small patterned pouch, a crumpled paper bag, and several sheets of paper, some with yellow highlights. The background is a red wall.

**THIS IS A QUIET STUDY AREA**  
**PLEASE DO NOT EAT, DRINK, TALK**  
**OR USE YOUR MOBILE PHONE**  
YOU MAY DRINK BOTTLED WATER

# How would you feel if you couldn't eat at your desk?

“

I'm not going to go to level 3 to stand around and eat the apple, I'm just going to eat the apple. I haven't been bothered by other people eating as they're generally respectful and use common sense.

”







**If a student  
needs help, is  
it easy to find?**

“

Library staff are  
like ghosts.

”







**Are you  
geared up for  
the student  
who uses  
multiple  
devices?**

“

I take my phone and tablet  
everywhere I go.

”





# Understanding the user experience is critical to facing today's challenges

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Students expect a lot from their libraries! They want a space that's able to accommodate the whole range of studying and learning approaches. They want a space that's able to accommodate a whole variety of different approaches to studying and learning. They want warmth, food and comfort. They want expertise and friendly faces. Most university libraries are looking to see what

they can do to manage and meet expectations whilst their buildings and budgets are under pressure. The best starting place for any process of change and development is the user. Placing the understanding of user behaviour at the centre of both tactical and strategic change is a key requirement of future success.

# We have helped our clients to:

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Implement strategic plans



Design new buildings



Inform customer service strategy



Redesign services



Refurbish their library

For more information, contact Ben Hickman: 0161 605 0862 | [ben.hickman@alterline.co.uk](mailto:ben.hickman@alterline.co.uk)

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**Contact us**

The Flint Glassworks  
64 Jersey Street  
Manchester  
M4 6JW  
0161 605 0862

LSBU Technopark  
90 London Road  
London  
SE1 6LN  
0207 183 9758

 [www.alterline.co.uk](http://www.alterline.co.uk)  [@AlterlineAction](https://twitter.com/AlterlineAction)