

Academic Offices and Informal Learning Spaces: My Maurie Pawsey Scholarship dichotomy

It's no secret that the Australian Higher Education system is experiencing a space crisis. The quality and types of facilities along with the amount of space available have universities struggling to keep up with demand as Australia seeks to establish itself within the global knowledge economy. The Rudd Government's Education Revolution to increase the percentage of 25-34 year olds with a bachelor degree from 32% to 40% by 2025¹ has resulted in a significant increase in both student numbers and additional academic staff. Additionally, there have been dramatic changes in pedagogical approaches to course content delivery. This leaves many universities considering how to meet demand for new types of teaching spaces within aging buildings which were designed to facilitate a pedagogy developed centuries ago. With these issues burning in my mind I undertook my 2009/2010 Maurie Pawsey Scholarship study tour and research, specifically concentrating on academic office accommodation and informal learning spaces for students. What I found was that we are not alone. In both the United Kingdom and the United States of America, higher education institutions are grappling with the same issues of balancing competing space demands within a limited or only slightly expanding space portfolio – yes, even those private institutions whose endowment funds we can only imagine and dream of.

With large percentages of space dedicated to academic offices, facilities teams around Australia have long been debating with academic staff the appropriate size of academic offices in an attempt to achieve efficiency gains in their overall space portfolio.² It is a topic which universities in the UK are also currently deliberating. From our own experience in developing new office standards at the University of Adelaide and listening to other institutions within the UK, it is very clear that when it comes to work roles and responsibilities, academics do not wish to be compared with commercial or private industry. And perhaps we shouldn't without considering wholistically what, as an institution, we are asking academics to undertake in striving to achieve our strategic education and research goals. Typically academics are expected to perform the role of teacher/ lecturer/ mentor, to undertake research and apply for additional research funding (depending on the profile of an institution), perform administrative tasks and in some instances provide some form of counselling for distressed or upset students.

Undertaking such diverse roles require academics to switch between collaborative and autonomous modes of operation continually, sometimes even within the same role.³ For example as researchers academics are usually required to provide some supervision to PhD candidates, or to meet with various colleagues to discuss findings and/or potential collaborations, requiring a collaborative mode of operation and a place to meet with others, where discussion can flow freely. However, they are also usually expected to undertake some research of their own, or apply for research funding which requires an autonomous mode of operation and a place where disruption can be minimised. Matching their facilities' requirements to enable not just one academic, but a whole school or department to switch between these two modes can be quite problematic. In the UK, Europe and the US a number of different solutions have been employed to try and address these issues:

1. Individual cellular offices (traditional approach)
2. Combi office (smaller individual offices adjacent to a shared interactive or collaborative zone)
3. Group rooms (for up to 5 part-time academic staff)
4. Open plan

¹ Australian Government. 'Transforming Australia's Higher education System', Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p.12

² There are also other gains universities would benefit from as a result of a decrease in office size, however for the purpose of this article I am concentrating on the effect on a universities space portfolio

³ Academic Workspace conference, November 2009

From research conducted into the effectiveness of these spaces it is apparent that one solution does not work for every institution, nor every staff member. At Loughborough University and MIT they have opted for a Combi office solution for their Department of Civil and Building Engineering and Stata Centre respectively. Although positively received by most staff at both institutions, there has also been some criticism by staff at the Stata Centre, where particular staff now chose to work from home.⁴

Similarly at the Delft University of Technology's BK City building who adopted a completely flexible approach to office accommodation where academics are not assigned a desk but are free to choose from a variety of different work settings in an attempt to improve interaction, collaboration and self ownership of chosen work mode, they actually experienced a significant decrease in occupant satisfaction with the new work facilities provided and found people rarely moved location during the day preferring to claim a work space as their own whilst within the building.⁵

Fig. 1 Analysis of ability to undertake different work modes within accommodation type

	Individual Office	Combi Office	Group Rooms	Open Plan
Autonomous	Yes	Yes	No	No
Collaborative	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

These examples suggest that perhaps more emphasis should be placed on helping staff transition into their new accommodation. A number of methods have been adopted in different universities within the UK, including:

1. Having a dedicated space champion nominated from the stakeholder group whose job it is to promote the new office accommodation and represent the academic stakeholders at workshops and briefings
2. Involve more academic staff within briefing process to facilitate engagement and ownership of the final product
3. Develop a clear change framework which clearly identifies who will be impacted and how

It must be said that these methods are not mutually exclusive. However, as the facilitators of projects and redevelopments, if an attempt to dramatically move away from the current status quo is desired, facilities officers should be mindful of the consultants they engage and the assistance that may be provided by other areas of their institution.

We all know the benefits of stakeholder engagement through the life of a project. However if a project is wanting to achieve a dramatic move away from current accommodation standards, it is important to recognise that no matter how many academics you include through the consultation process, it is not reasonable to expect them to come up with radical new ways of working, or to be able to envisage the future of workplace functionality whilst also conducting their day jobs. Change is a time consuming exercise, and we have found at the University of Adelaide to make the most of people's time in workshop and briefing sessions it is beneficial to provide something that can actually promote reaction and conversation. Therefore the consultants engaged for these projects need to be prepared to move away from traditional, passive briefing processes, and instead need to challenge and provide stimulus for debate.

Parts of these discussions should also include other areas within the University. Simply changing office facilities does not necessarily translate to a change in work process or role responsibility. Involving HR at an early stage of the project development may provide opportunities to look at the tasks academics

⁴ Campbell, Robert. 'Three years later: Does Gehry's Stata Centre really work?', *FAIA*, May 2007

⁵ Pinder, J (et. al.), *The Case for New Academic Workspaces*, Dept. of Civil & Building engineering, Loughborough University, Loughborough, 2009, p.14

are required to undertake from a whole of school or department perspective and come up with solutions which may alleviate some of the conflicting modes of operations currently expected of academic staff. This way we can address the cause of office dependency and not just the symptom. For example, some universities are investigating ways to alleviate the need for academics to meet with students in an ad hoc manner by establishing a collective reception point to manage student appointments and employing software solutions to manage case management/ pastoral care.

Perhaps on the other side of the space debate is student space. One of the common ways universities have accommodated growth in academic staff numbers is to convert traditional student spaces such as common rooms into staff accommodation. This is because traditionally these types of student spaces have been considered as optional 'add ons' to the core formal teaching activities students attend. However in recent years there has been a lot of influential thinking around how students learn and the spaces which are now required to help facilitate this learning. One of the most significant concepts to gain momentum is the notion that 'some of the best, most important and most exciting learning happens outside the classroom.'⁶ This has led to the development of the term 'informal learning' to describe such learning activities. Of course these activities have always occurred, however the importance of enabling this kind of activity to occur along with promoting student interaction on campus has become a key objective of many universities in an attempt to improve students' learning experience.

The most common manifestation of these types of spaces is the 'learning hub' or 'learning commons'. Providing students with a number of differential learning experiences and choice of study modes (ie collaborative or individual), these types of spaces usually result from the construction of a new building, or a major refurbishment within an existing space. Much literature exists regarding the pedagogical benefits to students in the creation of these types of dedicated student spaces, but I am going to concentrate on the not so readily acknowledged informal learning spaces that I believe need to be brought to the fore; those study spaces provided in foyers, corridors, and other less likely spaces around campuses.

From my investigation it is clear that these types of spaces are frequently used by students and often preferred to some of the other study spaces provided. This was demonstrated at Columbia University where it was the seats provided in the foyers of buildings and the entry to the Library which were most populated, even though my visit coincided with Summer break.

These spaces also provide some universities with an opportunity to try different furniture types, which may have not been seen as appropriate for more traditional study areas. This was highlighted by the Law School Library at Harvard. Recently refurbished, the Library has adopted a design concept for their fit out to match the original building which was constructed in the 1930s. As such, the furniture selections are very traditional with heavy looking chairs and robust tables. However, in the corridor link between the Reference Collection and the International Law wing bean bags have been provided for student use. This is a favourite haunt for students and provides them with an alternative to the more formal study arrangements throughout the rest of the Library.

However, not all of their attempts have worked. Within the central void space of the Library they have tried a number of different furniture settings. Located slightly away from the main collection and study spaces, this void space is little more than a circulation point between the two main wings of the Library building. To facilitate the use of this otherwise 'un-usable' space the Library has provided a number of chess tables and four single seater lounge chairs around a coffee table. Although located more within

⁶ TEFMA Learning environments in Tertiary Education seminar March 2005

the corridor space the lounge chairs have proven to be extremely popular for use by students, whereas staff have recorded little if any use of the chess tables within the same area.

Perhaps one of the most deliberate attempts to maximise the use of space traditionally nominated as un-usable circulation space is the Stata Centre at MIT. Here a conscious decision has been made to create as many opportunities as possible for students to meet and study within the main circulation corridor of the building. Various options for study have been provided from lounge chairs located around coffee tables, long banquette style benches and tables, to standard tables and chairs, resulting in this transient space acting more like a facilitator of community rather than a means to get from A to B.

In all of these instances universities have utilised traditional 'un-usable' or 'non-programmable' space in order to provide informal learning spaces for their student populations. These types of spaces have not yet entered into the vernacular of space usage, but have an important part to play in the delivery of informal learning space. This became evident when trying to describe these kinds of spaces to other facilities officers internationally in an endeavour to investigate examples as part of my study tour. As there is no one common understanding or language when referring to these spaces it was difficult to explain what it was I wanted to see and why I was interested in seeing them.

Without a common language it is also difficult to include them into our space calculations although they perform an important part of a university's ability to meet its educational objectives. In order for us to better understand the true impact these types of spaces have on a university's space portfolio it is critical to establish clear definitions of these spaces and an agreed terminology for comparison purposes. As space pressures continue to increase, ultimately these spaces need to be captured and included within TEFMA space guidelines and ISM to ensure we are providing enough of these spaces for our students to enjoy.



Columbia Butler Library Foyer



Harvard Law School Library – Bean Bags



Harvard Law School Library – Chairs in corridor space



Harvard Law School Library – Chess tables



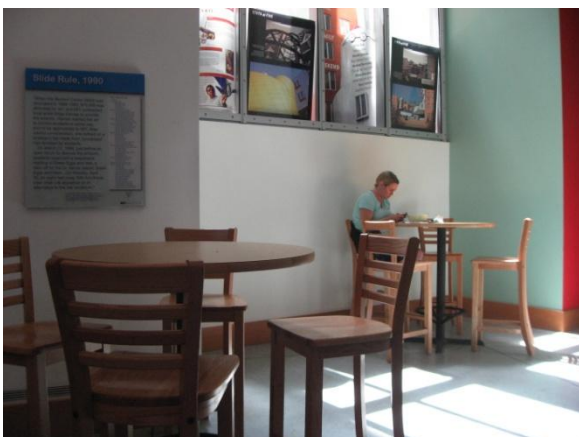
MIT Stata Centre – main corridor



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