
Investing in a new way of learning

Lisa Barwick
Communications and Marketing Officer,
University of Birmingham
Tel: 0121 414 2554
E-mail: l.t.barwick@bham.ac.uk

Toni Kelly
Learning Spaces Project Manager,
University of Birmingham
Tel: 0121 414 3667
E-mail: a.kelly@bham.ac.uk

In today's technologically complex world, the needs of students have never been so diverse. But while laptops, iPods and the wireless revolution have transformed how students communicate and obtain information, the way they learn has also evolved.

The University of Birmingham is committed to nurturing independent learners, able to think critically, show initiative and work collaboratively. Inevitably, this requires significant changes to the areas in which learning is delivered or supported.

Information services at Birmingham is now managing Higher Education Funding Council money allocated for just this purpose.

In the last two years some £4.5 million has been spent on several major projects aimed at developing and improving learning spaces on campus. This investment is part of the university's learning spaces strategy, a plan that will be shaping current and future development of learning space throughout the institution.

The availability of funding provides an ideal opportunity to create innovative, sustainable and manageable facilities to enhance teaching and learning, in line with the strategy.

To date three major projects have been completed: the Nuffield learning centre, the Garner learning suite and the Strathcona building, at a cost of £4m. Each space is unique in its design, with its own identity, but builds on the success of the others.



The Nuffield learning centre is a modern learning centre providing flexible learning space for student-centred open access learning. It comprises a learning suite, two flat-floored lecture theatres, two seminar rooms with a boardroom layout and five small-group teaching/study rooms. The larger rooms provide the opportunity for staff and students to change the layout to suit their teaching needs and styles. All rooms are equipped with a full range of audio and visual equipment. Included are social seating areas, vending machines and plasma screens showing rolling news throughout the day. A new innovation is the use of computer workstations known as huddles. A huddle consists of a circular group of tables accommodating five PCs. The workstation incorporates a 'housing' where the computer monitors, keyboards and mouse can be put away, giving a clear desk area. The centre of the building has no natural light, so in order to create a gentle and comfortable place to work, a lighting and painting scheme was incorporated in the design.

The centre is a radical transformation of a derelict building, consisting of old workshops and stores, where the development of the 'cavity magnetron' was carried out by researchers at the University of Birmingham. This device was initially developed at Birmingham and was then sent to the USA for volume production and further development. It is widely regarded as one of the most important pieces of technology developed in the Second World War because it allowed very small objects, for example U-boat periscopes, to be detected, and this was vital in winning the battle of the Atlantic.

The Garner learning suite is situated in what was an oak-lined traditional library. The new suite has been carefully designed to provide a modern working space whilst retaining some of the old features. Different zones have been created by clever use of furniture to accommodate a wide range of activities, including social, independent and group learning. Facilities include a meeting



pod with whiteboards fitted to internal walls; two group-study areas with PCs; a presentation room that can be booked via a new web-based computer booking system; 30 PCs and a social/caf  area with a plasma screen showing News 24. A new lighting system includes a colour change feature around the periphery of the room.



The Strathcona building was already home to a large number of learning and teaching spaces. However, several rooms became vacant, presenting the opportunity to increase the amount and range of learning and teaching spaces. The building now has seven large lecture theatres with fixed seating, thirteen seminar rooms with a range of furniture and layouts and three computer clusters with a total of 120 high specification PCs. A small new wireless caf  with vending facilities was also installed and upgrading of all power, data and telecommunications was undertaken.

The university will continue to provide a range of innovative learning facilities that ensure a high-quality student experience now and for the foreseeable future. Planning for the next round of refurbishment and upgrades to learning and teaching spaces has already started.

If you are interested in visiting the learning spaces, please contact Toni Kelly at the telephone and e-mail numbers above.