
'It's just like studying in your front room': designing a twenty-first-century library in a classic building



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BACKGROUND

Headingley Library at Leeds Metropolitan University is situated on three floors of a listed, turn-of-the-century building on Headingley Campus. It caters for approximately 8,000 students and offers library, IT, AV and faculty facilities. In less than a year it has been transformed from a traditional library to an innovative, flexible, student-centred library for the twenty-first century without closing its doors during the project.

In line with the strategy of the university, our vision was of a contemporary library in a classic setting – a library in a listed building but designed for the students of the twenty-first century, a library that would meet the needs of current students but in a space that could accommodate change. We wanted an innovative library where, above all, the students come first.

The redesign came as a result of moving out of part of our previous space so that it could be used

for university events – we lost some space, but instead of moving our existing services and facilities into the remaining spaces as they were, we took the opportunity to rethink the principles of how our library should be perceived. We thought imaginatively, made use of our observations about how students work and anticipated future demand by providing services they need now and into the future.

DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Our inspiration was taken from the way students work and learn. Our solution was to provide spaces to give them choices in when, where and how they could do that. Many of our students work while talking to their colleagues, using numerous technological devices simultaneously – and eating. Our approach was to provide spaces where they were encouraged to do this, and to provide spaces for the way they actually work, not the way we think they ought to work.

WELCOMING AND STUDENT-CENTRED

Many of our students have a considerable amount of group work to undertake, so our first decision was to create as much group study space as possible. Previously, like many other libraries, we provided group study rooms. Observation and feedback told us that whilst students wanted to study in groups they did not necessarily want to study in a private room. As a result we decided to turn the whole of the ground floor over to an open-plan group study area. The concept was not of 'screening students who want to work from the noise' but rather encouraging a feeling in the students that they can, within reason, make noise themselves. Sets of large tables and brightly coloured tub chairs are available and students study in pairs or groups, talking, surrounded by laptops, mobile phones and portable devices. First impressions of a lively, vibrant buzz are striking as one enters the library. It challenges traditional assumptions of what a library should be and, as one student said, 'It's just like studying in your front room.' Another student said, 'I like the big space when you come in. It's a lot more welcoming.'

Previously students were confronted with three different help desks, depending on what services they wanted to use. The new library incorporates a single point of help that is located on the group study floor so that it is close to the students. With fewer staff needed to support the desk, staff now have the opportunity to offer help in differ-

ent ways which include 'roving' throughout the library and helping students at point of need.

A LIBRARY OF CHOICES

Every student is an individual, and has different needs from their colleagues. They also have differing needs depending on the time of the academic year or of the day or, indeed, within their academic career. Our next decision was to try and provide enough choices to meet their varied preferences and needs.

Not all our students wish to work in a noisy space all the time, so we provided a large room on the first floor with individual study carrels for those who want to study in a more traditional, reflective, silent environment. The room is simply furnished, has a wonderful view over the surrounding area and is self-policing – students who do wish to talk have plenty of other spaces to move to. Bookings for group study rooms used to be continuously oversubscribed, but the open-plan ground-floor area has met the demand instead. A few bookable student meeting rooms are still available for groups who wish to work away from other students, for example to practice presentations.

The library was designed as a 24-hour study environment. Our observation also showed that students like to eat and drink while they are working. Many of us drink coffee at our desks and we recognised that this is the way students would like to work too. Because of the layout of the building, we were now in possession of a room outside the library's security envelope that we were unable to house resources in. We took advantage of this to create more group study space where eating and drinking are permitted, which has also proved popular. Extra bins and a more rigorous cleaning regime have kept the room a pleasant environment to work in.

FLEXIBLE

As the amount of space available to us was being reduced, we had to make what space we did have work harder for us. This was done by ensuring that study spaces could be used for a number of purposes. The whole library is connected to the wireless network and we took a policy decision not to purchase any more fixed pcs. Instead wireless laptops were purchased for loan. This has proved extremely popular with students, and instead of each carrel being designated as either for IT or study, without being able to do both, any

space is now multi-purpose and students can read, write or use IT in any one place.

Another strategic approach that we took was to disassociate the collections from specific spaces or areas. We had collections of books, AV materials, language materials, school practice materials and printed journals, all in designated areas, and we wanted students to feel they could use them anywhere in the library. Again, this enabled any one study space to have a number of purposes. The main book stock was moved to one floor, where previously it had been split, and this made it easier for students to find what they wanted. Similarly, the other collections were housed in smaller rooms, freeing up the study space they had been associated with. Students are now encouraged to take materials to the kind of study space that suits them. This has given us the efficiencies of space that were needed when our space envelope was reduced and has enabled us to keep our study seating numbers at the same level as before. Pleasingly, it also gives the illusion of more space and, as one student said, 'It feels a lot bigger than when it was the old book room.'

The book collection at Headingley Library is dynamic and highly relevant to the courses that are taught. A stock-editing exercise takes place each year and the printed collection has decreased slightly, from 156,000 to 148,000 books, in the last five years. In contrast, the library has invested heavily in e-resources and electronic versions of journals are purchased wherever possible. It is not being suggested that printed material has no place in the library of the future, but our library building needed to reflect trends in format of the material being used. Previously the printed journals were accommodated in a spacious room. A decision was made to move the collection to a compact rolling stack. Whilst some perceive that it has somehow been downgraded, this has meant that the large space it previously occupied is now available for mixed uses – students can still take printed journals there to study if they wish to, and they may be working alongside a student looking at e-journals on their laptop. The compact rolling stack is open-access and the entire collection is still available.

FUTURE-PROOFED AND TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED

On a larger scale, each floor or large room was designed with the future and change in mind. Our approach was to have as little fixed furniture as possible and to harness the latest technology. Floor boxes and the wireless network allow wire-

less laptops to be plugged in anywhere and smartboards have been installed. Our furniture was relatively traditional and low-cost, and is heavily used. Carpet colours change on each floor to indicate a different type of space. Today's library has relatively conventional furniture but with the flexibility designed into each space; tomorrow's library could potentially have a completely different look and feel without the need to reconfigure the building. Indeed, we are now looking at transforming one of our more traditional teaching rooms into a high-tech, inspirational learning room for students to work in outside their classrooms.

The new building design also gave us the opportunity to change our approach to some of the services that we offer. Self-service radio-frequency ID technology was introduced last summer and as a result we decided to design in a book returns room, where students post all their books after returning them themselves. Staff can sort books onto trolleys behind the scenes as they are returned. In the future, self-service issue could be located on the book floor if needed and we are now looking at self-service collection of holds and at different ways of managing our short-loan collection.

AT THE CENTRE OF UNIVERSITY LIFE

The library is now at the centre of university life on campus and works in partnership with a number of faculties to provide learning facilities outside their classrooms. For example, language students have access to self-service language resources 24 hours a day and the university's IT labs are part of our fully converged front-line services. This results in students on all courses passing through the building, some on their way to specific classes, some to stay and learn independently. The library at Leeds Met is also unique in the country in being part of one of the faculties of the university and we work closely with our colleagues in the faculty to enable them to open their specialist labs 24 hours a day. Most importantly, the university is proud of its library and we are now the centre of events, launches and open days where our innovative, highly student-centred approach is shown off as an asset.

CONCLUSION

The student-centred approach to library design has been an overwhelming success. Feedback from the Students Union, surveys and many individual students has been very positive. We

now have a library that has a 'lively, vibrant buzz', 'that is not how you'd expect a library to be' and that has enough choice for everyone. To keep the library open during this major building project was undoubtedly a challenge, and without the hard work, involvement and ideas of the staff it would never have happened.