Library Spaces Designed with Students in Mind: an Evaluation Study of University of Queensland Libraries at St Lucia Campus

35th IATUL Conference, 2-5 June 2014, Aalto University

NEDA ABBASI, Deakin University, Australia
RICHARD TUCKER, Deakin University, Australia
KENN FISHER, University Of Melbourne, Australia
ROBERT GERRITY, University Of Queensland, Australia

PRESENTER: MAJELLA PUGH, University Of Queensland, Australia
Majella to introduce herself and give a brief introduction to University of Queensland Library branches.

... This paper reports on part of the findings of a major evaluation study of physical spaces, in different branches of the University of Queensland (UQ) Library. The evaluation was carried out in 2013 via two survey instruments – one made available to students and one to library staff – and a walk-through observational study. The focus was on perceptions and experiences of library spaces and the positive features of these spaces.
A review of some of the major findings of the UQ Library Client Survey, carried out by insyncsurveys in 2012, identified the need to conduct a further evaluation of library spaces. The results of that survey suggested “facilities and equipment” as among the three highest priority categories for the library users after “information resources” and “library staff.” There was also the need to better understand the right balance of individual and group work spaces in the library.

This evaluation project therefore had three primary aims:
1. Determine if the library spaces are effective and responsive to students’ and faculty’s learning and teaching needs;
2. Identify areas of weakness and strength in relation to library spaces; and
3. Develop recommendations for future improvements to spaces.

While the study looked at the quality of physical spaces in all UQ Library Branches, three libraries at St Lucia campus were selected for an in-depth investigation of students’ pattern and frequency of space use, satisfaction with the quality of spaces and preference for certain spaces.
The evaluation study was guided by a theoretical framework identifying six key factors to be considered in the planning and design of library spaces; highlighting that library spaces should: (1) be functional; (2) be learner-centred; (3) be environmentally sustainable; (4) be socially inclusive; (5) effectively integrate technology; and (6) foster inspiration and student engagement. The data was collected through three methods: (1) walk-through observational study; (2) student survey; and (3) library staff survey. Here, we draw upon the data from the student survey.

The online survey of “Students’ Experiences and Perceptions of Library Physical Spaces” included three sections: (1) library user’s characteristics and patterns of library use; (2) quality and function of library spaces; and (3) survey sections focusing on three case studies of Social Sciences and Humanities Library (SSHL), Biological Sciences Library (BSL), and Walter Harrison Law Library (WHL). The survey included questions about students’ satisfaction with the overall quality of library spaces as well as specific factors: lighting, furniture, acoustics, thermal comfort, and wayfinding. Students were also asked to provide comments on the positive or negative factors affecting their preferences for certain library spaces.
2440 students started the survey (only 1505 students completed the survey). 77% of the survey respondents (n=1873) were aged between 18-24, with 78% studying for an undergraduate degree (n=1905). Given this, it can be said that the data largely reflects undergraduate students’ perceptions and experiences of library spaces. This paper focuses on what students considered as positive features of the library spaces; examined in one Likert scale question and an open-ended question.
Students’ responses to the question of the relative importance of certain qualities for library spaces identified as most important ‘the library as quiet places,’ followed by ‘quick access to information’ (There is a quick access to information including printed and electronic materials.) and ‘pleasant ambience’ (The library has a pleasant ambience to relax.).
1127 students’ responses to the open-ended question about positive features of physical library spaces were coded under 16 themes. As the analysis was restricted to comments addressing aspects related to the design of physical spaces, comments relating to the proximity of the library to other buildings, parking or bus stops at the campus were excluded from the data. 75% of the students (n=1650) thought that it “very important” that “the library is a quiet place.” The significance of this quality was further supported through the qualitative analysis of students’ responses to the survey open-ended questions. Students’ use of the word “quiet” and related terms were found in 532 references throughout the survey.

### Positive Features of Library Spaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No of Ref</th>
<th>No of Ref</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Quiet and peaceful environments</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Good library furniture</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Nice atmosphere / Pleasant ambience / Interior architecture</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Conducive environments for motivation &amp; concentration</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Air conditioned / Pleasant indoor temperature</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Group spaces / Spaces for collaboration</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Individual study spaces</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With regard to the library furniture, ‘functionality’ and ‘comfort’ were highlighted above ‘aesthetic qualities’ such as an attractive and colourful design. Specific functional considerations identified within students’ comments included: (1) ergonomic considerations in the design of tables and chairs i.e. adjustability of heights; (2) dimension of tables or useable working areas; and (3) particular design consideration i.e. ‘moveability’ of chairs and tables to accommodate different arrangements and group sizes.
The third most cited positive quality of the library identified nice atmosphere and pleasant ambience. Students described such spaces as having “a vibe and sense of the learning environment without the stress and hassle,” “familiarity of home away from home” as well as being “inviting,” “welcoming,” “cosy” and giving “a sense of personal space.” An example of good interior design repeatedly mentioned by students is that of the library at Ipswich Campus, which has an indoor garden with a stream running through trees and plants.
Comfort was mentioned by students throughout the survey 1154 times, and 93 references were made specifically to comfort in the open-ended question on positive design features. References to comfort were made in relation to the furniture, indoor temperature and generally comfortable environments. For students, comfortable places in the library are “generally clean and tidy,” “with little distraction and noise,” “without being too packed with many students,” and “providing a comfortable condition to study and relax.”
Five general recommendations, drawing upon the part of study presented here, which may be considered in library space development projects are:

5.1 Examining design related strategies to control noise and create quiet spaces. Among basic design strategies to improve acoustics are “adopting appropriate zoning of quiet and noisy spaces” and “using clear signage in proper locations to promote more positive students’ attitudes, behaviours and patterns of use.”

5.2 Addressing library furniture considerations. A key factor in this regard is the provision of a range of furniture that meets different students’ needs and preferences. Access to power points is another important issue for students particularly relevant to the design of library furniture.

5.3 Investing in the comfort, look and feel of the interior architecture. Our analysis suggests that there should be two primary aims in this respect: (1) providing for thermal comfort during summer and winter while being energy efficient; and (2) maintaining visual connections through the utilisation of views through windows or glass partitions.

5.4 Maximising the choice of study spaces and closely examining specific requirements of every learning setting / space type in your library. In addition to creating different learning settings, it is essential to determine the right balance between individual and group study spaces, and between formal and informal learning zones.

5.5 Conducting ongoing assessment of the quality of physical library spaces. This is the key to understanding students’ experiences, needs and preferences in relation to physical environments, identifying areas of strength and weakness and making informed and evidence-based decisions about future improvements to academic library spaces. Determining the right balance of different learning settings and space types should be an
important focus of such assessment.
The library is currently working with a design firm to develop a 5-year space plan for St Lucia Campus. The primary driver is to increase student study space, mainly through reduced collection footprint (50-75% reduction in on-site print). Findings are informing approach to the design of new library learning spaces and upgrades to existing spaces.
Thanks you ...

Library Spaces Designed with Students in Mind:
an Evaluation Study of University of Queensland Libraries at St
Lucia Campus
Feb-Dec 2013

NEDA ABBASI, neda.abbasi@deakin.edu.au
RICHARD TUCKER, richard.tucker@deakin.edu.au
KENN FISHER, fisherk@unimelb.edu.au
ROBERT GERRITY, r.gerrity@library.uq.edu.au