

A Success Story? Delivering the Vision for Catalyst

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Alison Mackenzie, "A Success Story? Delivering the Vision for Catalyst." *Proceedings of the IATUL Conferences*. Paper 8.
<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/2019/value/8>

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A SUCCESS STORY? DELIVERING THE VISION FOR CATALYST

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Abstract

In a bold and unprecedented move by the University, a new building, housing Library and Learning Services, Student Services and Careers was agreed by the University's Board of Governors at their November 2016 meeting. At an initial cost of £26m it represents the largest single investment in a new building project by the University. This was a project to create an inspiring building and '*provide an intellectually stimulating, creative and inclusive environment for [the university's] community*'. Whilst being highly student-focused, it was designed as a facility for the entire Edge Hill community including researchers, staff, alumni, and external visitors.

Its proposed location at a central point of arrival on campus, would make a statement not only about the importance of the student experience, but also act as a reference point to the institution's heritage of female empowerment with a 'suffragette garden' and spaces designed for outdoor public speaking and performances.

The decision to co-locate Services was seen as a progressive and sustainable initiative, creating efficiencies of space and resources, and enabling the delivery of a converged front-line service with 24 hour opening. Arranged over 4 floors, the 8000sqm building was designed to accommodate and deliver, all enquiries, advice and support related to **residential and on campus accommodation and campus life; pastoral support for care leavers, well-being, counselling, money advice and chaplaincy; academic support for library users, academic skills and research support; disability support; transitions between years and for those seeking careers advice, volunteering, graduate employment and part-time work. A complementary staff facing suite of services comprise advice for effective use of learning technologies, library resources and web based services.**

The construction of the building began in July 2017 and the first staff members moved into their new offices in June 2018, with the building and its services fully operational in September 2018. This case study will summarise key decisions made during the construction phase, including the development of a vision for the building and will reflect on the extent to which goals identified pre- entry have been realised during the first year of occupancy.

Keywords Post occupancy evaluation; user experience; vision statement.

Introduction

Edge Hill University is a campus-based university located in the North West of England, with c15,000 students and on-site accommodation for 2,600. It is primarily a learning and teaching institution with a focus on a wide range of undergraduate courses. Its research base is however growing and its reputation for health-based research and extensive health related courses, were

factors in its successful application to deliver medical degrees, starting in 2020. It has a tradition of being innovative in its approaches to learning and teaching and is equally passionate about student support and well-being. This is reflected in the investments made in specialist staff posts, facilities and buildings, one of which, Catalyst, is the focus of this paper.

Co-location not convergence

It is relatively easy to identify the anticipated benefits of co-location. Students benefit from improved access to resources, study spaces and a wider range of specialist support and advice; more self-service options to reduce 'unnecessary contact' and increase choice; greater visibility and profile for important specialist services. For academic staff and research students anticipated improvements include access to a wide range of professional support services in one location, and the addition of study environments designed for long periods of independent research.

It is important to emphasise the distinction between co-location and the more radical convergence of Services. The single structural change agreed was the introduction of a converged frontline service. This team is managed by Library and Learning Services on behalf of all Services. Its remit extends beyond a customer facing role to include management of the facilities, spaces, furniture in the building with the aim of optimising wayfinding, navigation and use of study spaces.

Building a vision

Senior staff within Library and Learning Services had been lobbying, and to an extent undertaking preparatory work, planning for a new library building for over 5 years and early discussions with the University's senior team had focussed solely on this proposal. A late intervention by the University's directorate expanded that plan to include Student Services and Careers. From a strategic perspective this was an extremely desirable proposal, but equally challenging for the senior staff in each of the Service areas who had no prior experience of working collectively, and for colleagues in Student Services and Careers who had not considered or expected the prospect of a new building, let alone co-location.

Preparatory work

The initial phase between January and June 2017, focussed on governance, communication and information gathering. The development of a vision statement was an important element, not simply a formality.

Developed under the headline *Bringing Together Library and Learning Services, Careers and Student Services Under One Roof* the following text was agreed through a process of consultation with managers from each area. More extensive consultation was considered but instead time was spent engaging with staff in a variety of activities designed to anticipate and help manage the changes they would encounter.

The Catalyst building aims to provide the Edge Hill community with a popular 24/7 destination where welcoming, knowledgeable, professional staff are on hand to support student life, research, learning and career development.

Aims

The Catalyst building provides an opportunity for Library and Learning Services, Careers and Students Services to work together, to build on existing good practice and experience of delivering excellent customer-focussed services, in order to provide an even better experience for our university community. Development aspects include:

- 1. Spaces: A contemporary, inviting and well-resourced environment will provide a focal point on-campus where staff and students are happy and able to meet, think, learn, create, and participate.*
- 2. Technology: Modernised online and mobile systems will enhance self-service and cross-service facilities, to provide working efficiencies and a more dynamic and seamless customer experience.*
- 3. Service Offer: A smart re-visioning of customer focussed help and support will see multiple touch points, both face-to-face and virtual, providing choice and convenience for customers.*
- 4. People: The co-location of staff from three core service areas will encourage new conversations and opportunities for innovation while maintaining the goals of high quality service delivery and standards.*

This vision statement has acted as a touchstone and a useful reference point to return to as a reminder of the overarching aspirations for all three Service areas. Translating it into practice for teams and individual staff members was and is an on-going activity and will be subject to review at the end of 2019.

What's in a name?

The vision statement was originally drafted before the name of the building was agreed. Creating an identity for the building was initially run as competition across all teams and the selected names then shared with the University's directorate for a final decision. Catalyst was selected by the Vice Chancellor. As with any personal choice, the response to the name was varied. Its real value lay in having an identity which could be interpreted by the interior designers and applied to the visual identity of the building, infusing it with a sense of energy and purposeful activity.

Fact finding

As a set of interdependent goals, the vision statement provided a steer for discussion and identification of priorities. To achieve the outcomes, initial exploratory projects focussed on gaining an overview of each Service area's requirements. Project teams were formed, and data was gathered on key activities. This base data was essential to inform decisions on space requirements and delivery of frontline services.

Data was gathered on footfall to each building, the ecosystem of enquiries, volume, type, resolution levels, staff roles and allocation of responsibilities. Further information on accompanying space and specialist requirements was also gathered and gradually fed into the interior design of the building.

The exercise highlighted significant variations in each Service area's collection of data. Library and Learning Services had a long tradition of collecting data, in part to fulfil the requirements of the SCONUL statistics, and internal KPIs. Neither Student Services or Careers had a similar external reporting requirement, or more generally prioritised data gathering to assist decision making. Without similar data sources, and without time to collect new data sets, the information collected relied on time limited snap shots of activity, focussing principally on volume of activity, access routes to services and support, and resolution levels.

The headlines from the research confirmed what was anecdotally expected – the library building had the highest footfall, experienced the highest volume of enquiries and supported a more comprehensive customer service. The research outcomes also offered the first insight into the differences across the Services, the variations in cultures, the approaches to service delivery and how staff roles and priorities are determined.

Within this context, and as the building project progressed, the vision statement grew in importance as a common reference point.

Space: physical

Spaces: A contemporary, inviting and well-resourced environment will provide a focal point on-campus where staff and students are happy and able to meet, think, learn, create, and participate.

Translating this into practice to optimise the available space was a lesson in iterative decision-making and negotiation with the architects, interior designers and construction team. Choice was limited. The outline structural design of the building had been completed prior to the Governors' approval and although there was some flexibility, its brief was to accommodate – shelving for the physical collection, frontline services, study spaces with and without IT, staff accommodation, specialist consultation spaces. A café and roof garden were included to provide an attraction to the wider university community.

Where choice was available, the conversations focused on layout, e.g. how best to arrange the book stock; where to locate the frontline service – desk or no desk; size of desk; design, height, accessibility.

The conversations on the design of the frontline service highlighted variations in expectations and assumptions. The interior designer's NoMAD (<https://www.nomad-rdc.com/>) brief was to create a layout which would enable most users to navigate and use services independently while retaining a face to face service for those requiring or preferring a personal interaction. Early discussions centred on how best to achieve this and where to locate the facility – the traditional approach, having a friendly face visible on entry into the building was the preferred solution for many colleagues, including the architects. The alternative view promoted by NoMAD

was to place the facility at a distance from the entrance – reframing its importance, recognising that for many users, choice over how to access services is a more important consideration than the physical presence of a help desk. This view prevailed and on entry into the building the self-service facilities, book return, issue, laptop loans, IT study spaces, are immediately available with the physical desk at a distance.



Figure 1: Ground floor layout

Specialist spaces

1-1 support spaces, primarily for appointments with students to discuss personal issues e.g. careers, money advice, well-being or counselling, disability, were poorly understood by the architects. Their brief was primarily focussed on the design of a new library and the consequences of co-location with Services with significantly different requirements was underestimated. Based on the data gathered from Student Services and Careers the optimum requirement was 10 confidential 1-1 consultation spaces. One difficulty was identifying a suitable location. Space had already been allocated for group and individual study and with the University's commitment to increasing this provision, the option to re-model, was limited. The creative solution was to insert a mezzanine floor between the ground and first floors with

capacity for a waiting area, workshop space, 9 consultation rooms and a staff office.

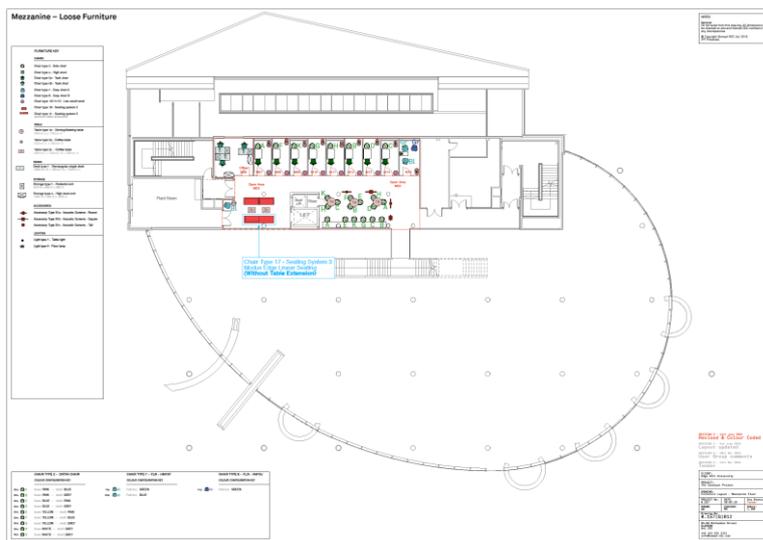


Figure 2: Layout of mezzanine

The limiting factors were lack of natural light and ready visibility of the services on entry into the building but the advantage of co-location of specialist support and services in an identifiable zone within the building outweighed the disadvantages.

The provision of other specialist spaces within the building, including facilities for research active staff and doctoral students; dedicated IT training suites; provision of specialist IT; spaces for 1-1 learning support for students with disabilities and more generally 1-1 support for academic skills were identified and provisionally allocated. However, as the construction took shape, the suitability of some of these spaces led to further creative thinking.

The space identified as an IT training suite was located on the third floor, independently located and at a distance from designated quiet/silent study facilities. Early site visits highlighted the unsuitability of the space, specifically the lack of wall space to mount display screens. The alternative was to swap the designated space allocated for independent research; the major disadvantage to this location was its proximity to the quiet/silent study environment.

This illustrates one example of the importance of discussions at the design stage. In this instance, although significant benefits were achieved through an accelerated construction and fit out schedule, the compromises had an impact on the functionality of key spaces.

Loose furniture

The choice of loose furniture was significantly influenced by the research undertaken by NoMAD; they developed a colour palette, selected a broad range of furniture from utilitarian IT tables and chairs, to individual and group seating, flexible, fixed, with feature lighting or reliant on natural light.

Their choices were in part informed by the need to hit an increase in study spaces to 1000, while aiming to introduce a variety of different spaces to accommodate study preferences. They were also influenced by staff and students' feedback on their priorities for the building and the

outcomes from workshops run with staff which revealed how the interior design might relate to the university, its history, the local community and the aspirations of staff and students.



Figure 3: example of different study spaces

Designing a building and frontline service

Service Offer: A smart re-visioning of customer focussed help and support will see multiple touch points, both face-to-face and virtual, providing choice and convenience for customers.

Developing this service from scratch required a shared vision to meet the expectations of every student, that, whatever their query, the place to go would be the Catalyst building. This re-visioning of the frontline customer-facing service aimed to provide the University community with:

- *A single, face-to-face, roving, virtual and self-directed information and triage service, which offers resolution, referrals, appointments and guidance for all enquiries related to library, academic support, employability, student life and wellbeing.*

And the sector with:

- *An exemplar of an innovative approach to service delivery, offering personalised choice, immediate referral to the most appropriate service or specialist help, limiting bounce and significantly improving access.*

The model is based on choice, delivering all transactional or information-based enquiries online through a self-help service, with the option to engage on a personal basis if required. It also extends into space management and the team hold responsibility for trouble-shooting, monitoring and assessing how the building is used, adjusting furniture and facilities as necessary. This additional responsibility has the benefit of staff being very aware of the symbiotic relationship between the services and spaces and what constitutes an excellent, as opposed to adequate or poor experience while using the building.

Post occupancy evaluation

Recognising the innovative nature of the shared service, the building project included a year-long post-occupancy evaluation (POE) of all aspects of the building and services. The aim was

to learn how spaces are being used, understand preferences, likes and dislikes. This data is then fed back into the development of the building, to improve on its functionality, to better understand any issues with wayfinding and to assess the effectiveness of the frontline team when signposting and referring users to specialist staff, services or resources. Using ethnographic techniques, the evaluation has included, non-participant observation and creation of heat maps to gauge use of the building; graffiti boards for instant feedback; guerrilla interviews, touchstone tours and photo diaries.

Unpicking the issues and gathering intelligence from all stakeholders has provided insights and helped us understand the impact environmental factors have on the tolerance levels of users, alongside some of more nuanced requirements linked to space and study preferences.

Space review

This section includes two examples of the evaluation activities used to gather feedback and actions taken.

Case study 1: Individual space and appointment delivery

“More individual study rooms as they are always in use for appointments”

Feedback from interviews, graffiti boards and photo dairies suggested that students wanted more access to bookable individual study rooms during peak times. The rooms available were originally planned as dual use; used as appointment rooms during the day for those service areas offering 1-1 appointments and released to students outside of core hours.

The quantity of the feedback from students, including the direct student voice, prompted a review of appointment data and uptake of the rooms during core hours. In response to the evidence, rooms were released without compromising access to specialist support when required. It also prompted an exploration of alternative semi-private spaces for appointments. Improvements to alternative individual study spaces, including more partitioning of desks and reviews of layouts was also achieved, using a variety of methods, including **online polls** (as shown below).

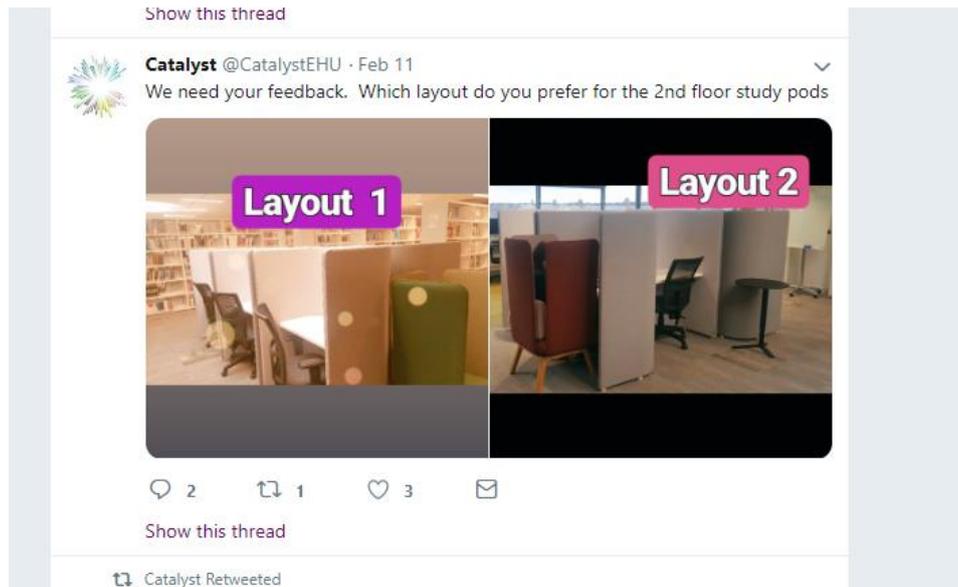


Figure 4: online poll using twitter

Case study 2: Group space and management of spaces

“More group space that doesn’t need to be booked would be great”

“Not enough group working tables”

“More group tables without computers.”

Although there was more bookable group space than in the previous library, students commented on the need for more group space generally in the building.

Observations supported the feedback and showed it was also having consequences on other areas. Users were found to be conducting group work in quiet areas as they were running out of space on the lower floors. This was having implications for the frontline team who were struggling to manage noise because of the lack of suitable alternatives for groups.

To help overcome the issue, the noise policy on the first floor was relaxed and additional group space was created on the ground floor using existing furniture to test if this would be used by students.

An underutilised podium event area on the ground floor was also broken up to create group working areas and furniture was moved from upper floors to create additional social space.

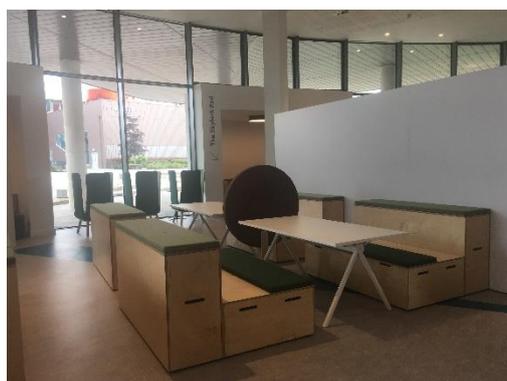


Figure 5: reconfigured group space

Large tables were moved from the second (quiet) floor and relocated on the ground floor.

Through observations of these changes, it was clear that the reconfigurations were proving popular, although further needs were identified around power. The altered area on the second floor was being used less by groups, with a positive impact on noise.

Different configurations were regularly tried out and staff involved were encouraged to engage with students through the process, explaining why changes were being made and seeking further feedback. A high level of trust, along with good communication, empowered staff to make decisions quickly and with confidence so they could react with speed and trial different layouts gathering feedback as each scheme changed.



Figure 6: Examples of group areas; on the left the original layout on the ground floor; on the right the current layout; although the original layout is aesthetically more attractive, the visual cues were misinterpreted, and students failed to recognise it as a waiting area; the more overtly functional layout, with accompanying sign has resolved this issue.

Conclusion

The post occupancy evaluation has several strands currently in progress. It is premature to determine whether the vision conceived in abstract and with perhaps overly ambitious aims has been realised in practice. However, the feedback from the user communities is predominantly positive and appreciative of the visible efforts made by staff to respond to feedback and act promptly to test out solutions. Although this paper has focussed on the evaluation of space, of equal importance is the evolution of different ways of working across teams, prompted by the decision to co-locate. Whereas improvements to the physical environment are immediately visible, changes to staff attitudes, ways of working, perceptions of peers, are much harder to capture, but nonetheless will be explored through various feedback mechanisms to gauge staff engagement with the culture of co-location and whether, this has made a positive impact on service delivery.