

ROLLING OUT THE LEARNING COMMONS - ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS

E. McPHERSON¹, J. GANENDRAN²

¹ *Learning Centre, Canberra Institute of Technology*
elizabeth.mcpherson@cit.act.edu.au

² *Learning Centre, Canberra Institute of Technology*
jaci.ganendran@cit.act.edu.au

ABSTRACT

The CIT Learning Centre provides all the Library and Information services for CIT students as well as hosting and supporting Flexible Learning and Drop-in Learning Support across all 5 campuses. In 2008 the Learning Centre was faced with a potential reduction of one quarter of its space on one campus in order to accommodate a new Student Services Hub just when demand for its library and learning services were increasing.

By adopting a Learning Commons approach to the redevelopment of the space, it has become a popular and vibrant student focal point that is used at all hours that the campus is open, even when library staff are not in attendance. The challenges and issues include the significant increase in student traffic, the need for different work spaces – social and collaborative, technologically enhanced, through to quiet areas, the staffing mix, collaboration between staff from two different work areas, the expansion of flexible learning, supporting student use of computers and systems (more than twice as many computers as before), management of computer bookings, and keeping all stakeholders happy.

In this short presentation we will share some of our strategies and solutions, including the expanding role of the Virtual Commons, and thoughts on what the future holds for these physical and virtual library spaces?

1. BACKGROUND

The Learning Commons example that we focus on in this paper is situated in the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT). CIT is the ACT's largest publicly owned education institution with

RTO status. It has been awarded Training Excellence Gold status and been a finalist for the Large Training Provider of the Year award in 2007, 2008 and 2009. In 2009 there were 34,600 student enrolments studying over six million nominal hours across 5 campuses (now 4), a Learning Centre and one other small training facility. In 2009 over 5,915 job ready graduates completed 390 nationally and internationally recognised qualifications that span trades, apprenticeships, para-professional and professional levels across 18 industry groups [1].

In 2009 44.9% of CIT's students were 25 years or younger, 31.8% were 26-40 years old, while 23.4% were over 40. 84.7% were studying part-time, 68.9% were in the workforce with 44.6% in full-time employment. A large number of these lifelong learners are aiming to increase their technical skills, and for many of them English is not their first language. These characteristics demand great flexibility of training options and increasing use of online technology to achieve student and industry focussed learning outcomes.

In response to earlier drivers for flexibility of learning provision CIT was an early adopter of Flexible Learning Centres establishing one 'outpost' Flexible Learning Centre 15 + years ago and redesigned the main campus' library to include a Flexible Learning Centre and Information Commons elements a year later. Both have become mainstays of flexible, self-paced and increasingly online delivery since that time. Following a reorganisation at CIT in 2007-8 into 16 linked, flexible and innovative centres, the CIT Learning Centre was formed. This Centre provides a full range of library and information services, flexible learning services and support, access to computers and student-centred learning spaces on 4 main campuses and one (soon to be two) outpost locations. Like all providers of tertiary education CIT is currently engaged in ensuring that it contributes to meeting the national education challenges indicated in the Bradley review, including "to turn the rhetoric of lifelong learning into a reality" [2], and contributes to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)'s national growth targets.

In 2008 the Learning Commons concept and approach was researched and workshopped by the CIT Learning Centre in order to establish a framework for the Learning Centre to support the strategic goals of CIT with respect to students' learning needs. We conducted a literature search in order to learn from the many libraries, particularly in educational institutions, that had developed a learning commons. We visited learning commons at Victoria University, Holmsglen, RMIT, Hume Global Learning Village, and also visited the Brisbane Square public library, the State Library of Queensland and Southbank Institute of Technology's new library. Discussions with staff at these facilities provided valuable input to our plans.

A workshop was held for Learning Centre and other CIT staff. Two guest speakers¹ helped us to explore the following questions:

- Why do we need a learning commons approach at CIT?
- What has changed in the ways student learn?

¹ Shirley Oakley, Executive Director, Library Services, Charles Sturt University and Vanessa Little formerly from the Hume Global Learning Village and currently Director of the ACT Library and information Services

- How are teacher roles in the learning process changing?
- How has library use by students changed?
- What physical spaces and resources does the Learning Centre need to provide?
- What digital/online spaces and resources does the Learning Centre need to provide?
- How will the Learning Centre best support student-centred learning? - support for students and support for teachers?
- What new collaborative approaches do we need?

We learned that we needed our Learning Commons framework to apply to all students (both full and part time, and of all ages) in both physical and virtual spaces and that we need to focus on student centred provision of library and information services, and learning support services both face to face and online. As learning moves from being teacher-centred to learner-centred the Learning Centre's role in helping students to become independent learners is crucial.

2. ISSUES

The Learning Centre on one of CIT's smaller campuses - the Southside Campus – provides a useful example of how we have used a Learning Commons framework to address a range of issues.

The Learning Centre at Southside occupies a space of 975m². Prior to 2008 it was not in a central location or on a main campus thoroughfare. The décor was subdued and a bit dated. Following much lobbying a bank of computers had been introduced a few years before, but staffing and opening hours had been decreased due to budget limitations, and use by students was limited. By 2008 student numbers on the campus were increasing rapidly due to large increases in students doing child care and nursing qualifications. There was demand for increases in flexible learning options for business courses on this campus. And, at the same time it was proposed that the Learning Centre space be reduced by about one quarter in order to realize a commitment to build a new Student Services Hub as a separate entity. The Hub provides a range of services to students to assist them in the successful completion of their studies and to enhance their personal lives. Services include enrolment support, counseling, disability support, equity, Indigenous student support, concessions and financial assistance. Natural tensions existed between the need to use the limited space for the delivery of a broad range of support services to the same group of students.

Our emerging Learning Commons framework initially helped the Learning Centre to clarify the issues around student learning needs for:

- a variety of different work spaces – social and collaborative, technologically enhanced, through to quiet areas
- a greater number of computers both to allow for the expansion of flexible learning and for general student use
- increases in student hours of access to computers

- availability of more support for student in their use of computers, information finding and information literacy, and general learning support.

3. SOLUTIONS

Drawing on the Learning Commons framework enabled us to re-imagine the total space available as a Learning Commons that would integrate the Student Services Hub with all the Learning Centre services, resources and facilities in a one-stop shop for students. We were able to convince all the relevant parties that the Student Services Hub construction at Southside should result in a small Learning Commons – a student focused space – that would solve all the existing issues. This compact area was then redeveloped and refurbished as a learning commons with the following features:

- It is now right on the main thoroughfare into the campus via a new campus entrance.
- The majority of the space is accessible to students all hours that the campus is open regardless of whether staff are in attendance.
- The library collections and service desk for library and information services have been rebuilt and relocated.
- The Student Services Hub has been built within the same learning commons space.
- Both these areas are secured when staff are not in attendance so that students can still continue using the rest of the learning commons at all times that the campus is open.
- Flexible learning areas are now well equipped with computers and custom built furniture to support large and small groups working with or without a teacher. These flexible learning spaces are easily repurposed depending on need.
- The central space is the heart of the learning commons, providing informal learning and social space for group and individuals.
- The number of computers has been doubled, and wireless access has further increased computer access and usage.
- Level One ICT support for students is available in the space.
- A Drop-in Learning Support service provided by specialist teachers from CIT's Vocational College uses the central area as a base. This service provides a roaming service throughout this area to assist any students with literacy, numeracy, study skills as well as specific learning needs.
- Three seminar rooms provide areas for group work and are equipped with PCs and a Smartboard.

The learning commons development at Southside has been a great success. The original issues were addressed and students and staff love the space and the services.

As it is now part of the main route into the campus it is therefore now a central location. The refurbishments have made the space lighter, brighter, more modern and functional, and much

more welcoming and useful for students. The number of computers has more than doubled; usage has increased manifold. Flexible delivery is thriving in the Learning Centre at Southside. The Student Services Hub was integrated into the learning commons so that students move seamlessly between its services and the rest of the learning commons space. Student usage has increased dramatically – computers, work areas and informal learning spaces are in constant high demand. More students are using library and information services and Drop-in Learning Support sessions are very popular.

Our Learning Commons approach at Southside has provided student spaces where students can be supported to take responsibility for their learning. It has integrated Library and IT services (facilities and support), and flexible learning, with additional learning support services, creating student areas where services are co-located. It has enhanced the informal learning experience of students.

In spite of the significant increase in the use of the Learning Centre at Southside and all the pressures that entails, staff at this campus identified as being highly satisfied and engaged in a recent staff survey. The application of the Learning Commons framework has increased the options of service they feel they are able to offer to students and teachers, expanding their understanding and delivery of library services. An example of this that all staff are encouraged to be involved in the acquisition of digital resources for teaching and learning, and to use CIT's new digital repository to make these available immediately to teaching staff.

The Learning Centre has also been able to use a Learning Commons framework to guide a refurbishment of our space on another campus (Bruce) which was also triggered by the need to accommodate a Student Services Hub. And on our largest campus, Reid, the Learning Commons framework has guided a number of smaller refurbishments. Although each of these locations is a very different in size and design the framework has allowed the redeveloped spaces to become a Learning Commons that provides spaces for students to seek information, learn and study that are:

- informal and social
- collaborative and flexible
- suitable for individual study and quiet reflection, as well as
- being well supported ... help is on hand.

We have found that adoption of a Learning Commons model has and continues to provide the CIT Learning Centre with a framework for continuous development of our spaces, services and resources that puts student learning and learning support needs at the centre, and positions CIT to meet current and future vocational education and training needs of students.

4. STRATEGIES

In implementing the Learning Commons model across the Institute, it has been useful to apply a common set of strategies to planning when designing spaces and services. These include:

- Fully integrated learning and information services provided in a learning commons environment (physically and virtually). This is reflected in the Institute's Teaching and Learning Plan and further applied in the development of new online systems.
- Raising strategic and operational acceptance to applying the Learning Commons approach to redesign of space and services across CIT which ensures that learning and support strategies are seamless and most importantly, student-centred and located where the students are.
- Being mindful of current pedagogies where teachers and those supporting learning (librarians etc) are facilitators of learning. We ensure that there is a pedagogical underpinning of all decisions in our spaces and a match of pedagogy to space.
- Ensuring that services are designed to minimize the requirement for staff presence eg self help, and hours of opening, by securing areas that do require staff presence and leaving as much space as possible for student self-access.
- Designing multipurpose spaces that design in flexibility for all learning spaces. When you don't have much room for separate zones, each space must be multipurpose. eg a small seminar room is at different times a place for noisy collaborative work, a place for individual quiet study, and a place for a few students to get away from the busy main open space. The 'zone' for Drop-in Learning Support is defined when the teacher appears and the sign goes up ... it's not happening in a classroom that students go to, but in the student space that they're already in.
- Ensuring that furniture and equipment is readily movable by staff and students to redefine space use whenever necessary eg a seminar room that is easily converted into an exhibition space or a meeting room or multimedia space; larger areas easily converted into spaces where enrolment and information sessions or a teaching and learning expo may occur.
- Developing the virtual commons to reflect the physical Learning Commons. A series of online projects is currently underway to ensure that the virtual commons delivers the same flexibility and functionality that's built into physical space. These include a new eLearn environment that provides better and easier access to teaching and learning online and all online learning resources; online enrolments; online ICT and tutorial support; online information literacy sessions as well as links to social networking sites and communication. All reflect the Learning Commons approach.

5. WHAT'S NEXT

We intend applying the Learning Commons framework and strategies to existing spaces whenever an opportunity presents itself (for example for new furniture, refurbishment of an area, redesign of a service, input to strategic planning of assets and campuses).

We have plans for further developing our virtual commons – by applying the Learning Commons framework to online resources, services and support we aim to provide a much more integrated online experience for all of our students where self-accessed and assisted learning and information support is easy to use.

We need to develop further strategies to cope with our success, to meet student expectations of this multipurpose space and keep all the stakeholders happy. Students are wanting more space, more access to technology, more access to services, more support such as Drop-in Learning support), more online access to resources, services and support. At Southside we are coping with the significant increase in student traffic by adjusting the staffing mix, increasing collaboration and integration of staff from different work areas, managing computer and space bookings and being flexible.

We aim to ensure that all new and refurbished learning spaces are designed as flexible spaces for flexible forms of learning, including self-paced, start any time learning, drop-in sessions to supplement online learning, or an expanded drop-in learning support provision.

We are planning to meet community need by developing new outlying Learning Centres in areas that don't have a CIT campus nearby, but require high levels of community collaboration. For example we have been also using the Learning Commons framework to design and develop our new est Learning Centre at Gungahlin which opens in February 2011. With a town centre site, this partnership with a year 11/12 college and a public library will provide a vocational learning and training hub and support centre for people who live and work in Gungahlin. This venture includes close collaboration with the new Year 11/12 Gungahlin College with shared use of some college and public library spaces and opportunities for more seamless and better connected learning pathways between secondary and tertiary education. It will provide accessible flexible learning across a range of courses; access to computers, internet, study areas, drop-in support for CIT students who live/work in Gungahlin but whose program may be based at another CIT campus; and local access to CIT information, application, enrolment processes for the full range of CIT's courses.

We are succeeding in developing the Learning Centre as a Learning Commons that underpins CIT's approach to its learners and now see the possibilities of CIT as a learning common within the community. Our Learning Commons framework has informed refurbishments, new developments, service provision, and new, emerging learning support roles for learning in the VET sector and CIT in particular.

At each opportunity to make changes to our spaces and services we are focussed on developing flexible, multi-use, attractive spaces that encourage student use (whether the initial uses are social, research, resource access, accessing computers, finding a place to work etc or undertaking flexible learning). We plan to continue rolling out the learning commons across all our physical and virtual locations.

[1] Canberra Institute of Technology: Annual Report 2009 pp 4-7, March 2010,
<http://www.cit.act.edu.au/about/publications>

[2] Professor Denise Bradley: Review of Australian Higher Education, December 2008