Developing a Sustainable Staffing Model for the Learning Commons: The Victoria University Experience

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Abstract
Considerable attention has been given to physical design elements of the Learning Commons as many Universities seek to create more student-centred environments. However less attention has been paid to the development of sustainable staffing models that underpin the Learning Commons. In addition to describing the Learning Commons journey, this paper outlines the planning, implementation and evaluation processes employed in developing a service and staffing model at Victoria University (VU).

A multi-tiered service model was developed involving the three collaboration partners: Library, Teaching & Learning Support and Information Technology Services. The paper describes the roles and capabilities that each group brings to the shared environment of the Learning Commons in a multi-campus institution.

The VU experience is differentiated by a strong focus on learning. To improve engagement with students and to capitalise on peer mentoring theory, a Student Rover program was developed and piloted. Student Rovers provide first-tier support to students in the Learning Commons environment. They also assist their peers through referrals to more experienced discipline specialists as well as contributing to a culture of learning.

The paper highlights learning outcomes in the evolution of a Learning Commons philosophy to underpin the mission of an innovative and dynamic university.

1. The Victoria University (VU) Context

VU is an unusual university. It is a multi-campus, multi-sectoral university with special responsibility for the western metropolitan area of Melbourne, Australia. As a multi-sectoral university VU has higher education, vocational education and further education provision. VU therefore provides education to students from the full range – entry level to post-Doctoral, of the Australian Qualifications Framework. VU has eleven campuses of varying sizes in the CBD and inner and outer western suburbs of Melbourne. Some VU campuses have higher, vocational and further education students and some are sector specific. A number of the smaller campuses focus on a few particular disciplines, while other larger campuses offer a diverse range.

The characteristics of VU were detailed in a recent publication (Keating, Kent and McLennan 2007). In short they include:

- a legislated responsibility for the western region of Melbourne , a culturally diverse community,
- A region with a relatively high proportion of the population born overseas
- 35 per cent of households in the region speak a language other than English (Sheehan and Wiseman 18)
- Low levels of knowledge and social capital
- Lower proportion of educated persons employed in professional and associate professional positions,
- High concentration of industry - increasingly in logistics, warehousing and transport

Approximately half of VU's student population comes from the western region described above, with a high proportion of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students. In comparison to most Australian universities, VU also has high proportions of low socio-economic status (SES) students, part-time students, first in the family university students and students who work in paid employment for more than 15 hours a week.

The challenge for VU is to embrace its diversity and aim to maximise access and success for all its students. At VU it is recognised that a 'one size fits all' approach to learning and teaching will not adequately support all our students.

2. Learning Focus

In 2003 a new Vice-Chancellor and President brought a renewed commitment to being the 'major education provider in, and *for* the western region' and for taking the west to the world. The role of the University was re-cast as an enabler of the West.

The new strategic plan emphasised learner-centred teaching. A key priority of the University since has been to develop a teaching and learning policy framework which supports a shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred practice. VU's overarching Learning and Teaching policy highlighted this. Its first principle states that the University's foremost focus is on learning:

> *The purpose of teaching is to enable learning. A central focus of the University is therefore the provision of environments that promote high quality learning* (Victoria University: Learning and Teaching Policy 2005).

In addition, the policy states that at VU the needs and aspirations of students should be the starting point for the design and delivery of any program or of any student learning support service, and that collaborative learning approaches are intrinsic to 'learner-centredness'.

It was recognised that this shift needed to involve not only teaching practices but re-formulating learning environments throughout the University to actively promote the types of learning that make students successful at the University and beyond. Recognising the implications of students' complex lives is central to rethinking VU's learning environments:

- The largest discretionary block of time for students is outside the classroom
- Informal learning is self-directed, internally motivated and unconstrained by time, place or formal structures

- Learners can construct their own courses of learning, often facilitated by technology
- The full range of students' learning styles is not covered when interaction is limited to classroom settings. (Sheppard and Dede in Watson 2007)

As Weimer states, 'Being learner centred focuses attention squarely on learning: what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying the learning, and how the current learning positions students for future learning'[1]. In addition, learner-centred approaches are those that encourage active learning; that is, they engage students in their learning and require them 'to question, to speculate and to generate solutions' (Biggs 2003).

> *Active learning requires students to take responsibility for their learning in both collaborative and independent learning situations, and is dependant on students developing and employing generic skills and attributes.* (McLennan and Keating 2005)

3. The Planning Process

In late 2004 VU moved to an information commons approach facilitated by securing an Australian government Higher Education Innovation Program (HEIP) grant of $3.1 million. These funds were used to revamp all campus libraries including the addition of 600 new computers and pod-styled workstations as well as wireless facilities and casual furniture to improve the amenity of the Commons. A common suite of software was installed on all computers and Library staff members were trained in basic IT support. New IT staff members were employed at three of the busiest campus libraries to assist with students' technology problems.

The concept of the information commons as 'place' where students have access to library resources, productivity software, areas to work individually or in groups, reference assistance and technical support to research and produce projects under one roof embodied VU's adoption of 'learner-centredness'. [2]These enhanced facilities were immediately popular with students, meeting their needs in ways that the existing library spaces had not. Consequently the Library experienced a rise of 15% in student usage between 2005 and 2006.

At this point VU was at the stage of 'isolated change' in Beagle's terms. He describes the transition from information to learning commons including the stages of adjustment; isolated change; far-reaching change; and transformation. The first stage of *adjustment* is a computer lab with access to productivity software and electronic resources. The second stage of *isolated change* adds media authoring tools and coordinated service delivery to the mix. According to Beagle: 'While it better *aligns* the library with other campus priorities, it is still not intrinsically collaborative with other campus initiatives' [3]

This was the starting point for further rethinking on how to support students in the VU's libraries and other common spaces. VU had aspirations to implement Beagle's 'far-reaching' and 'transformation change' a progressive transition from information commons to the learning commons and then to 'far-reaching change' to include coordination with other university units such as centres for student and staff learning and development.

The pattern of service delivery was altered to 'better align itself with changing campus-wide priorities, and has done so by integrating those functions formerly carried out *within* the library

[1] Weimer p xvi
[2] Church p.75
[3] Beagle 2004 p.1

with others formerly carried out *beyond* the library's purview'. At this stage 'The service profile is no longer library-centric, and becomes essentially collaborative' [4]

Consistent with a university wide rethinking of how we support 'learners' and their learning in the context of our commitment to 'learner-centred' teaching a high level cross - functional strategy group was formed to develop VU's learning commons' strategy.

Simultaneously staff members from the Library and from Teaching and Learning Support (TLS) began to investigate the learning commons concept in greater depth. Key staff members undertook study tours to other universities in Australia, New Zealand, USA and UK. A key influence on VU's thinking was the Glasgow Caledonian University where:

> *The primary aim of [their] Learning Centre is to support people in the process of learning. This support is extended to learners in their individual endeavours, and to the institution in its development of approaches to learning. What is being proposed for Glasgow Caledonian University is therefore not a new Library, not a Learning Resource(s) Centre, but a Learning Centre*[5].

A literature review informed the strategy group's discussions and ensured that there was a balance between operational and learning issues. A report (Keating and Gabb) explored the concept of the learning commons in a multi-campus, multi-sector University. It defined the difference between the information commons and the learning commons:

> *While the information commons integrates library and IT services for students and other users, the model is still essentially library-centric. The learning commons, on the other hand, is not simply a reinvigorated academic library, and its focus is not principally on technology.*
>
> *The learning commons relies on a greater functional integration of learning support than the information commons. In this model the library becomes one of three or more educational partners in supporting students.* (Keating & Gabb 2005)

Remy's exposition of the broad learning commons mission was also highlighted:

> *its mission [is] not merely to integrate technology, reference... and services but to facilitate learning by whatever means works best. As a library service environment, the Learning Commons will enable students to develop a framework to understand and evaluate the impact of information technology on the choices they make as researchers and practitioners. As a bridge to the classroom, it will create the conditions in which students engage critically with information, see themselves as active participants in the production of knowledge, and continue that participation far beyond their university experience.* [6]

Consequently a number of principles were agreed by the strategy group to guide the planning and development of VU's learning commons model:

- Learning oriented – facilitates active, independent and collaborative learning
- Learner centred – focuses on student needs, preferences and work patterns
- University wide - part of university-wide development of learner autonomy
- Flexible – responsive to the changing needs of learners for resources and support

[4] Beagle 2004 p.2
[5] Les Watson 20/8/00 then PVC at Glasgow Caledonian University in *Places and Spaces for Learning* September 07
[6] Remy 2004 p5

- Collaborative – based on collaboration between different learning support areas in the University
- Community building – provides a hub for physical and virtual interaction for staff and students (Keating & Gabb 2005)

These principles were applied to both the physical and virtual spaces and staffing of the commons.

The physical space

The physical space is designed to accommodate student needs rather than those of the organisation. It accommodates the social as well as an academic dimension of study and provides an environment that is welcoming, non-threatening and not dominated by staff. The place is highly visible, centrally located in the campus and close to other student services.

The virtual space

The virtual space allows students to access online materials and services such as learning support. Online resources range from those for specific units of study to those providing generic support for all students.

The staffing

Those staffing the learning commons are approachable, easily recognisable and provide a continuum of service including effective referral to other staff members. Student assistants are used not because they cost less but because they help to shape an environment that is welcoming and non-threatening for students and because they learn a great deal from the experience. Student feedback on the facilities and service is collected in a variety of ways and used to improve the service. [7]

VU's shift from a 'teaching culture to a culture of learning' mirrored the desired paradigm shift from libraries of the past to the future. Bennett comments that

> *Librarians and library designers need to join faculty in this paradigm shift. We need to understand that the success of the academic library is best measured not by the frequency and ease of library use but by the learning that results from that use. Our purpose is not to circulate books, but to ensure that the circulation of knowledge produces learning. Reconceiving our purposes involves a fundamental shift for librarians trained in a service culture – one that is comparable to the shift that faculty are making as they move from a teaching to a learning culture. Academic librarians need to make a paradigm shift from a service culture to a learning culture.* [8]

Planning for the design, resources and access to learning spaces needed to be flexible enough to support the diverse ways that students learn and behave. It was agreed the learning commons should support a variety of learning preferences and work patterns providing spaces where individuals and groups of students can work and develop autonomous learning habits and confidence along a continuum from supported to self-directed learning (e.g. through access to group study and presentation spaces).

[7] Keating and Gabb pp17-18

[8] (Bennett p.11)

It was also agreed social dimensions of study should also be encouraged creating an attractive student hub within the campus experience. Modern, comfortable, casual and movable seating should encourage informal group discussion. Students should be able to interact with one another and feel that they are part of a learning community. According to Bennett, traditional library designs often focus on library operations and collections rather than students. He cited a study that found that conversations about class content did not readily occur in libraries but did happen in more 'domesticated spaces' such as cafeterias and refectories. He noted that food outlets are becoming a common feature of library design.

The group identified that a student campus 'hub' could increase the potential for students to integrate socially and was therefore deemed important, as it could be a valuable support to first year students whose effective transition to University life is a key determinant in their retention. The learning commons could extend the productive time students spend on campus because they have access to resources, assistance, peers and sustenance within the one location.

> *As an extension of the classroom, library space needs to embody new pedagogies, including collaborative and interactive modalities. Significantly, the library must serve as the principal building on campus where one can truly experience and benefit form the centrality of an institution's intellectual community (Freeman)*[9]
>
> *…the design of our learning spaces should become a physical representation of the institution's vision and strategy for learning – responsive, inclusive, and supportive of attainment by all (JISC)*[10]
>
> *If you can design the physical space, the social space and the information space together to enhance the collaborative learning, then that whole milieu turns into a learning technology. People just love working there and they start learning with and from each other (Seely-Brown)*[11]

VU's latest usage data reinforces these views. The first Learning Commons at the City Flinders campus was opened in late 2006 (Kent and Gallagher 2007). Situated on the 15th floor of an inner city building with 360 degree views, the space has been claimed by the students and made the social centre of their campus. Usage has increased by 60% compared with the previous library space that was dated and in a location that had no outlook. The addition of learning and career support services and friendly student rovers has made it the number one choice for students to learn and study together. At peak times the space is at capacity and there has been a strong demand for longer opening hours.

4. Service Models

Mark Herring [12] suggested that we must revolutionize ourselves first and then our buildings. Consequently service and staffing models, structures and partnership arrangements are crucial to the smooth operation of the Learning Commons environment. Key drivers for new service

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[9] Freemen, G.T. in Watson (2007) *Places and Spaces for Learning*

[10] JISC Designing Spaces for Effective Learning in Watson (2007)

[11] John Seely-Brown in Watson (2007)

[12] Quoted by Beagle 2002 p287

models include the growth of technology, changing modes of teaching and learning and different skills and needs of clients, both academics and students.

Users unable to distinguish between tools and content and unaware of organisational structures are confused about whom to consult for help. Ferguson et al suggest that this is a valid reason to consider collocation of service functions into a single campus location. Integrated IT and Library functions combine the expertise of both librarians and technologists. [13]

Many universities in the UK have pursued converged services as a result of pressure to reduce staff costs, particularly at senior management level. Through *Operational Convergence*, joint and collaborative activities are shared between overlapping or complementary service organisations. Through *Organisational Convergence* library and other academic support services have been merged to form large information service departments. [14]

However Ferguson et al suggest that merging to save money or to reduce staffing presents 'significant obstacles to success' and may lead to a downward spiral in service quality and staff morale. [15]

Within the Information Commons, integration and convergence of services should be focused on the user to underlie models of planning, service development and service delivery. Beatty [16] suggests that planning becomes clearer and less political when the user becomes the 'touchstone'. This was also a feature of planning at VU, where *operational convergence* has been pursued through partnership arrangements between the Library, Information Technology (IT) Services and Teaching and Learning Support (TLS). Staff members remain in their professional and organisational structures but come together in the physical Commons to provide a collaborative service. Each of the three business units has other responsibilities beyond the Commons and a merger of the three groups would create a large organisation with limited synergies. However during the initial planning period for the Learning Commons model, the three business units all reported to the same Deputy Vice-Chancellor who acted as a strong advocate and champion for Learning Commons developments.

The literature points to significant cultural difficulties in bringing together staff from disparate organisational units and backgrounds. The observations of McKinstry and McCracken [17] accord with some experiences at VU:

> *During the planning sessions for the combined space, we tended to focus on safe topics such as the location of the printers (etc) rather than confront our fears about each other. We spent a lot of time working on the name of the desk but not enough time on how we would work together at the desk….. We expected more of a one-team approach and it feels more like hands-off between two distinct, yet friendly, teams*

Operationalising the Commons model can bring some tensions especially around resources. MacWhinnie [18] highlights that funding can be an issue for co-located groups and that

[13] Ferguson et al p39
[14] Abbott 1998 pp 28-29
[15] Ferguson p40
[16] Beatty p153
[17] McKinstry and McCracken 2002 p397
[18] MacWhinnie 2003 p 253

competing interests may surface. At VU seemingly minor issues such as shared access to photocopiers have created some tension and required careful negotiation between separate groups. According to Beatty: 'The Information Commons is a complex organizational unit with a diversity of interest, priorities and resources'. Like VU, the Information Commons at the University of Calgary has an integrated model where staff report to existing line management (eg IT staff in the Commons report to IT). At Calgary an Information Commons Operations Team was formed including representatives of the various stakeholder groups.

Similarly at VU, while the Library has daily responsibility for the operations of the Commons, a Learning Commons operational committee has been formed to address issues that cut across the different work groups. It is also anticipated that this group may assist in improving communication and understanding between groups. Over time and due to changes in personnel, new players have been added to the Learning Commons arena. New staff members who were not present at early conceptual and service development discussions may be unaware of past agreements and have less understanding of collaborative modes of working. This requires ongoing training and sensitive awareness between collaborators.

A related issue is the level of ongoing involvement in the Commons. While library staff members provide the majority of staff working within the Commons environment, specialist staff from other groups (e.g. learning support or careers advisors) may only work in the Commons on a sessional, part-time or rotating basis between multiple campuses. Again further work is required to constantly share the Learning Commons mission with changing workforces and identify innovative models for collaboration.

Ferguson[19] points to the administrative, physical, collaborative (or operational) and cultural dimensions of integrating staff from disparate groups. Working in a shared or converged environment may also result in perceived threats to opportunities for career progression, or worries about dilution of skills and de-professionalisation. These and related issues are highlighted by Abbott when reporting on experiences at Birmingham University, the largest converged service in the UK. She suggests that to the contrary new staff opportunities and career prospects have arisen including the need for hybrid skills. Biddiscombe (1999) also suggests that 'converged service environments can facilitate novel and speedier progress in these areas because of the cohesion of hybrid team'.

5. VU Service Model

The development of VU's service model for the Learning Commons has been an iterative process involving experts from the constituent parts. It is summarised in the table following.

Tier	Form	Who?	Where?	Activities
3 Help in Background	Individual Consultations	Reference Librarians Learning Support staff	Consultation rooms Offices	Sessions arranged via shared booking system
	Scheduled workshops	Learning Support and Library staff	Workshop rooms Training rooms	Regular program with publicity
2 Help in	Drop-in Study Lab	Learning Support Staff	Workshop Rooms	Individual work with assistance if

[19] Ferguson et al p.41

Background			Study Lab	required
	Online	Virtual LC Team		Develop online materials
	Ad hoc workshops	Learning Support Careers and Library Staff	Training Room or study lab	Topics of current interest or need
	Integrated service desk (triage) On call support Self Help materials	Paraprofessional staff	Service desk Student workstations	One-stop shop
	On call support	IT and Careers		IT recovery Register laptops Resolve problems Resume checking Queries on jobs
1	Online			
	Rovers			Training, supervising, monitoring, evaluating
	Phone enquiries		Desks	
Preparatory Proactive Developmental	Embedded support through collaborative curriculum development with teaching staff			Share strategies through cross-disciplinary teams

The three tiered service model sits on top of a developmental layer of faculty and course embedded support. This is perhaps the most difficult but most important development challenge relying on cultural change in academic teaching areas.

The first tier support relies heavily on the student rovers which will be described in greater details shortly. The rovers are trained to provide peer support at an accessible level with referrals to specialist or expert staff when questions are beyond the expertise of the rover. This tier also includes online self-help information and phone and email assistance.

Second tier support includes the integrated service desk or 'triage' as well as on-call support (e.g, IT) and ad hoc workshops.

Third tier or 'help in background' support includes specialist support through scheduled workshops and individual consultations in offices or a suite of consultation rooms.

6. Student Workers

Students have provided a source of ready, affordable and worthy labour in universities and libraries for many years as Reeg-Steidinger[20] highlight, academic libraries have 'long relied on student workers and have valued their peer rapport for a variety of tutor or assistance programs. Citing the work of Gartner and Riessman they posit that student tutors actually learn more than tutees. Through such work experience students increase interpersonal skills, enhance their own technology knowledge base, and acquire advanced research abilities.

[20] Reeg-Steidinger et al 2005 p.67

Student workers make reference to the transferability of these skills as they commence permanent positions.[21]

VU has a strong track record in student leadership and mentoring programs. With learning and career support staff members as key partners in the Learning Commons initiative, it was not surprising that incorporation of students into the service model was an important factor. The students were not seen as a source of cheap labour but rather a key component to the learning process. The approachability of fellow students compared with staff from other generations was a plus, particularly for students who might be 'first in family' at university.

Funding for a student rover pilot was provided by TLS, who took the lead role in the project and provided a rover supervisor. Nevertheless Library and IT staff also played a key role in developing the student rover position description, recruitment and training process. Networking with colleagues at the University of Newcastle and University of Technology Sydney resulted in useful intelligence on their student rover programs.

Students who already had proven experience in orientation or peer mentoring schemes were encouraged to attend an information session and subsequent initial training session during which the students were observed and interviewed. The student rovers were selected and trained to work in the City Flinders Learning Commons, where they were provided with ongoing mentoring via the rover supervisor. Rovers work in pairs for a maximum of 12 hours per week during the 12 week higher education semester with various shift combinations between 11.00am and 6.00pm weekdays. A collective online diary was established to share learning and knowledge within the rover community as well as handover sessions between shifts. These arrangements are designed to give students the space to reflect on their role, refine their responses to problems and share insights with their peers on a regular basis. The Rover Supervisor and the TLS staff member who have access to the diary monitor the Rovers to identify further support and training needs. Rovers also keep basic statistics on the types of enquiries they get from students.

Rewards for student rovers were another area for investigation. Commitment 2 of VU's differentiation strategy titled 'Making VU a New School of Though' assures at least 25% work and community based learning as a universal feature of VU courses. This commitment is the subject of a major project and 4 targeted course groups will offer this in 2008. However it is too early to implement a student rover rewards scheme that includes credit towards coursework at this time. While the interim arrangement of payment as casual staff was acceptable to the rovers and easily implemented, in the long term it is hoped that the reward arrangements may include formal coursework recognition. Nevertheless the current cohort of student rovers values their experience, and the enhancement of their Curriculum Vitae through this experience. VU will be reframing its employee enterprise agreement in the next year and it is likely that new forms of employment that complement the educational experience will be developed. Nevertheless these processes are not simple or easily resolved. For example existing staff have expressed some nervousness about their own job security as a result of increased employment for students.

Six months after the pilot commenced, two more Learning Commons became operational. Although the rover pilot had not yet been evaluated, it was agreed to extend the scheme to the St Albans and Werribee campus Commons in the second half of 2007 in order to test the

[21] Reeg-Steidinger p.72-3

model in a variety of contexts. Funding for the extended pilot was sourced variously with half coming from a student leadership project fund and the balance shared between the Library and TLS. A similar recruitment and training process was initiated and the initial cohort of rovers was used as part of the training and support scheme for the second intake.

At the time of writing, the student rover evaluation project including an external reviewer is not yet complete. However anecdotal feedback and textual comments gleaned through the annual library customer satisfaction commend the scheme. As one student put it:

> *I believe the introduction of the roving library staff is fabulous. I have used them now on every library visit, as you do not have to wait in a queue for assistance.*

Feedback from the rovers highlights the enhancement of their own learning experience although it is still too early to detect if this will be reflected in better results. Rovers have suggested that they have a much deeper knowledge of resources and services that can improve their own studies. They feel obliged to know about everything so they can give quality answers. Some have commented that they have become well known across campus and receive requests for advice when they are not working in the Commons. One rover commented that they are sometimes interrupted during their own work in the Commons while 'off duty'. Additional funding to continue the student rover scheme in 2008 has been proposed through the VU budget bids process and is likely to be approved.

Aside from the benefits of the student rover initiative focused on the peer mentoring model, the University Library has been under increased pressure to extend opening hours for all facilities. In addition to the student rover initiative, IT services provides employment in the Library and Commons context for information technology and business undergraduates under a co-operative scheme that rotates students through employment in a number of university areas such as the IT help desk. In the commons context, these advanced students provide technical troubleshooting assistance. The Library also benefits from hiring VU students under other work based learning in technology and marketing areas. In addition to the experience provided for the students, regular staff members have commented about the positive experiences they have received from working closely with this special kind of staff member.

Student feedback suggests that they require minimal staffing in the Commons, particularly out of core hours. As some students stated: 'just let us in and we'll look after the place as long as we can use the facilities'. A pilot has been undertaken in the latter quarter of 2007 to extend opening hours using student library assistants to provide 'study hall' supervision of the premises. Additional funding to extend opening hours under these conditions has been sought for 2008 and will include the services of more than 20 student library assistants.

Beatty[22] highlights the role of similar student assistants in some cases called 'navigators' to provide assistance and informal instruction with technical problems. Technical specialists are available to provide next level back-up or escalation for more complex technical problems.

7. Service Desks

> *There is no single name, model, or definition for the approach to delivering services from a single, centralized desk.* [23]

[22] Beatty pp.154-5

[23] Allegri and Bedard 2006 p.32

In his Information Commons Handbook, Beagle[24] suggests that: 'probably the most important issue to confront at this stage is that of single or multiple service desks'. Options vary from 'single omnibus service desks that combine information, reference and IT support, to multiple specialized service points.

A single or converged desk is aimed at the student who doesn't know if they have a technical, production or informational question[25]). An example of the single desk is in the Saltire Centre at Glasgow Caledonian University. The enquiry desk called 'the base' is designed to 'answer some of your questions right away and tell you about some of the services you can use', refer and make appointments for services, provide forms, advice on university systems, IT and library information, and to borrow and return laptops and AV equipment.

Within VU's service model a 'triage' desk provides a common interface to clients and provides a one-stop shop to meet student needs. The triage concept is not new. Beagle[26] introduces the concept of a main help desk in a triage area that includes greeters and rovers. He suggests that it should be adjacent to the coffee shop, lounge, quick access workstations, study skills and writing centres and e-classrooms. More specialized help is located in separate areas.

Allegri and Bedard [27] also introduce the concept of triage suggesting that patrons can get answers and help for almost all (95%) of needs! They suggest that triage and referral should be transparent and effortless for the patron with success dependant on training and attitude.

In Australia, Wilson[28] suggests that the information desk could be replaced by a triage desk where 60-70% of queries may be simply answered. He also recommends that more complex queries are referred to experts. This model can potentially free up more staff time for experienced staff to 'work the floor' or to provide quiet uninterrupted support in dedicated consultation areas. Wilson is also consulting to VU's major Learning Commons at the Footscray Park Campus where a triage desk is planned for the prime, high visibility location between the two entrances. VU's model incorporates a single multi-functional service desk. Associated with the model is the use of a number of consultation rooms in different configurations for specialist staff to work most commonly with one or two students.

At the University of Queensland's new Biological Sciences Library, another Wilson project, a welcome desk also acts as a triage station for many enquiries. According to Webster (2007) the service model includes librarians on call to handle more extensive or complicated issues as well as IT support staff. The reference desk timetable is replaced by a 'roving librarian rota' and staff members move to the students rather than waiting at a service desk. In a novel response to students who don't want to give up their workstation or leave their laptop, phones have been installed in order that library staff may be called upon to give assistance (Webster 2007).

Bailey and Tierney (2002) suggest that while the concept of a front help desk serving as a single point of contact and referral to specialized services is appealing, the move from concept

[24] Beagle 2006 p.92
[25] McKinstry and McCracken 2002 p.39
[26] Beagle 2006 p.92
[27] Allegri and Bedard 2006 p33
[28] Wilson 2007

to reality has been 'slow and incremental'. At Indiana University while three different service points are provided in the Commons, all share a common online knowledgebase for staff. [29] Models for the staffing mix at service desks are also subject to discussion. For example as transactional tasks such as loans decline and as self-service increases, there is an opportunity to retrain and change staff roles to add greater value. Gohlke and Ray (2003) [30] report a situation where a decline in circulation resulted in a change of function and name to 'Access Services'.

Allegri and Bedard (2006) [31] report the trend towards greater use of paraprofessionals on desks. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill the hours spent by professional librarians on service desk has been reduced. In such cases professional staff members are released for higher level tasks such as academic liaison and teaching roles. In other circumstances, desk duties for librarians are reduced to peak times with paraprofessionals covering quieter periods. MacWhinnie (2003) [32] reported on a study of 19 Information Commons in the USA that concluded that 'it is not surprising that most of the ICs examined either combine some level of professional staffing with student workers or limit the amount of professional staffing to peak hours of use.

Merged desk functions sometimes involve collocation of staff from diverse areas such as reference, circulation, technical and IT areas. While users hopefully perceive an integrated service, internal problems may be experienced through an expectation that staff from a variety of backgrounds, levels and salary groups may carry out the same work. This must be managed carefully from a people and industrial perspective.

At VU the service model in the Commons is predicated on a strong base of self-service. In addition through training of library staff in basic IT skills, the use of student rovers and assistants, and smaller comparative numbers of specialist IT, learning and career support staff, the service desk function is largely staffed by library employees. Requirements to extend opening hours have also resulted in a greater reliance on student assistants to run basic services outside core hours. Due to the diversity of size in Learning Commons facilities at VU, it is difficult to dictate a single staffing mix for all sites. Smaller campuses will continue to require a generalist staff response while larger campuses lend themselves to greater specialisation.

There has been considerable debate in professional and design circles about the physical structure of service desks. While the converged model brings multiple functions together, large desks of mammoth proportions present obstacles to users and discourage access. In addition legislation for disabled users requires allowance for different heights in desk design. At VU's St Albans campus, the refurbished Commons includes a triage desk comprised of separate elliptical components to present a more welcoming face to all users.

8. The Virtual Learning Commons

The majority of the literature concerning the Learning Commons is about the concept, the physical environment and the service elements. Little has been written about the digital or

[29] Dallis and Walters 2006 p.256
[30] Gohlke and Ray 2003 p.59
[31] Allegri and Bedard 2006 p.34
[32] MacWhinnie 2003 p.252

virtual Learning Commons, although electronic hardware, software and services are a significant component of the physical commons.

Gregory and Nixon (2003) [33] report on a project at Iowa State University where an 'Undergrad Electronic Commons' was developed through a grant in 1997. The project forged partnerships between librarians and teaching faculty with a goal of integrating electronic resources into undergraduate education. In 2001 the project's title was changed to the Instruction Commons to reflect a broader mission and as a metaphor for the virtual, instructional 'gathering place' that had been created. The website provides access to online courses, resources and research guides through this information literacy initiative.

Similarly Werle (2004) reports on the Digital Learning Commons initiative in Washington State, USA. A nonprofit organisation funded by the Gates Foundation provides a portal for K-12 students and teachers including educational materials, online courses and technology tools. [34]

The University of Manitoba established a Virtual Learning Commons in September 2006, despite not having a physical Commons. The project combines student support resources with tools to help students achieve academic success as well as a social networking environment. For example an Assignment Manager provided a guide to common tasks such as writing a term paper, preparing for an exam or making a presentation. Scheduling workflow is available to guide the student through the various steps. [35]

At VU a collaboration between the Library, Teaching & Learning Support and the Flexible Learning Unit was successful in winning a Teaching and Learning Grant in 2007 to establish a Virtual Learning Commons. With a large number of students in part-time employment and unable to visit the physical Commons, the project aims to provide online tools and resources and opportunities for virtual learning collaboration similar to the services available in the physical Commons. A detailed project plan has been developed and awaits final approval before the project proceeds to an implementation phase.

As highlighted previously on VU's service model, a fundamental assumption is that staff members will work more closely with faculty to embed Learning Commons principles and support into courses. This is a difficult challenge that requires the collaboration of Learning Commons groups. A university wide commitment is required to bring about the necessary culture change to ensure that all teaching at VU is learner-centred and exploits the learning opportunities inherent in new types of learning spaces. For this reason the design of innovative collaborative learning spaces included in the Footscray Park Learning Commons is important. Academics need continuing support to build their confidence to utilise learner-centred options to facilitate collaborative learning in the curriculum, as well as in the related role of the learning commons. A measure of success would be transparency between activities that occur in the class and the Commons.

Beagle[36] points to some of the cultural issues in changing staff roles. He noted reluctance of some staff to move from role of 'sage on the stage' to the perceived less gratifying role of 'guide on the side'. He also posits that a reorientation from 'instruction' to 'discovery' may be

[33] Gregory and Nixon 2003 p.423
[34] see: www.learningcommons.org
[35] Further information visit: https://www.umanitoba.ca/virtuallearningcommons/page/402
[36] Beagle 2002 p.290

difficult to achieve in a parent institution still oriented towards instruction, hence the need for VU to continue to evolve its learner-centred teaching approaches.

9. Evaluation

> *Few assessment or evaluation methods or instruments focus directly or explicitly on the effectiveness of Information Commons services. While some explicit evaluative instruments have been developed in the past few years, most deal implicitly or indirectly with the effectiveness of Information Commons services.*[37]

From October 2004 to March 2005, Joanne Herring visited 25 Information Commons in the USA and found that while 'few libraries have done formal assessments of their ICs, even fewer did a formal information gathering of potential users before implementing the IC' (Loman and Oblinger 2006)[38] This is perhaps not surprising given the complexity of the commons framework which transcends standard library services. In addition the evolutionary nature of Commons developments means that few Commons remain true to their initial plans.

In addition to the use of library quality and effectiveness studies, Beagle does offer some examples of measures of library success that have been used to evaluate commons such as metrics for the circulation of materials, increased occupancy, usage of resources and numbers of instruction sessions, students taught and reference questions answered. At VU annual client survey data has been examined and dramatic increases in occupancy rates have attested to increased satisfaction.

However as MacWhinnie argues, the Commons is a new construct that extends service delivery beyond the scope of traditional libraries. New methods of assessment are necessary to measure the effectiveness of new services. The direct contribution of the commons to the learning outcomes of students would be difficult to measure but should not justify avoidance of this importance task. Work on this is proceeding at VU.

One possibility is to look beyond library evaluation methods. At a recent (2007) series of *Places and Spaces for Learning* seminars hosted by the Australian Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education[39], the concept of Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE) was offered by Jo Dane, an academic with a background in interior architecture at Monash University. According to Dane, utilisation and frequency rates do not necessarily measure success or the end-user experience. POE seeks to measure the degree of alignment between designers' intentions and end user experience. Educational POE is as much about people as it is about buildings and conceivably is the domain of a variety of professions including architects, university staff, consultants and researchers.

It is clear that there is much work to be completed on evaluation of the Commons. On a positive note, Macwhinnie points to the continued growth in number of commons implementations as an indicator of success despite the lack of objective evaluation data. The commons movement has sparked many different and varied implementations and labels since the opening of the Information Arcade at the University of Iowa in 1992!

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[37] Beagle 2006 p 200
[38] Loman and Oblinger 2006 p.79
[39] http://www.carrickinstitute.edu.au/carrick/go

10. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted key issues in the Learning Commons journey at VU,that was guided by a strong theoretical framework that drew on the literature and experiences in other contexts. While considerable attention in the literature does focus on the physical aspects of the Learning Commons, less information is forthcoming on sustainable staffing models to underpin the Learning Commons. The paper outlines the planning, implementation and evaluation processes employed in developing a service and staffing model at Victoria University (VU).

The multi-tiered service model is constantly undergoing revision based on the variety of experiences gained in a large university with multiple campuses that differ in size, student cohorts and approaches to learning. VU has followed a collaborative rather than merged model of management for the Learning Commons involving three partner groups within the University. The roles and capabilities of each group contribute positively to the shared environment of the Learning Commons. However cultural issues about working together should not be underestimated. These also have the potential to change over time and as the working environment changes.

VU has a strong focus on learning and this will continue to mature as the university implements its 'Making VU a New School of Thought' in the next 10 years. Consequently the staffing and service models utilized to date will also need to evolve over time.

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