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A changing space:
a case study of the Research Hub at University of Leeds Library

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Repurposing space in academic libraries is high on the agenda for institutions across the UK. Academic libraries strive to allocate, record and assess every square foot in order to optimise all useable library space, and to provide environments that enhance the student experience and further research excellence. The Research Hub at the University of Leeds is testament to evolving ideas about what library space should be, how it should serve users and how users interact and work in library space today.

As in many libraries, Leeds University's Edward Boyle Library held extensive collections of reference books, which took up premium floor space on level 13 at a time when more and more researchers are turning to digital collections and are increasing the demand for seamless access to information via IT. Researchers are seen to be working more collaboratively and need space to hold meetings, training, networking and events. Consequently, the library had to change in order to support them. In addition, university research and innovation strategies are driving forward the critical roles the library performs in relation to increasing research funding and supporting research excellence. Conventional library space, with all its rich history and conceptualisations, is not easy to change, but change it must. Space can be continually adaptable and expansive, rather than fixed and subject to inertia.

The development of the Research Hub on level 13 of the Edward Boyle Library was shaped by our researchers' requirements. A survey, conducted in June 2014 as part of the planning of the refurbishment of the library found that researchers and postgraduate students wanted a dedicated library space, separate from that used by undergraduates, where they would have access to a variety of study environments. As a result, the Research Hub has been designed to provide opportunities for individual or collaborative working of taught and research postgraduates and research staff.

For researchers working independently, the Hub has ten individual study rooms, each equipped with a PC. Generous desk space, with individual lighting and plenty of sockets to charge mobile devices, are available in large silent study areas. For those who prefer collaborative working, seven IT-enabled group study rooms, with large screens linked to Airmedia software, enable users to share data from up to four mobile devices simultaneously. All study rooms are available on demand through an online booking system. You can see some of the facilities on offer in our Research Hub video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThbYRgyYa64&t=4s&list=PL4PSr5RRxgLHElQq296fw5tl_JrZ_ccFn&index=3

Two large research meeting rooms are equipped with excellent presentation equipment, including a white board wall and lecture capture technology. The rooms are available for researcher training, conferences and networking events. Since the Hub opened in September 2016, a number of researcher-led events, training and workshops have been held in the specially designed meeting space. Research staff have arranged workshops, presentations and training courses specifically aimed at the research community. These range from workshops on ResearchFish, robotics and open access to an EU funding symposium. Postgraduate researchers have also benefited from workshops and training delivered by the library and the university's Organisational Development and Professional Learning (OD&PL) service. In the six months after opening, over a hundred events and training courses were held in the Hub and attracted nearly 3,500 participants, the majority of whom were research postgraduates and research staff.

From the early stages of planning for the Research Hub it was clear that the library and OD&PL had a strong, shared commitment to developing the Hub as a focal point for training and as a vibrant, interesting space for researchers. Since the Hub opened, very well-attended OD&PL training sessions have run every week, covering topics such as academic writing, time management

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during a research degree and preparing for a viva. OD&PL has office and storage space for training materials in the Hub, which has become an important and familiar workspace for our OD&PL colleagues. Dr Tony Bromley, Senior Training and Development Officer, has found that the high-quality Hub space 'provides more flexibility than we have had previously in being able to provide small workshops or open up the whole space for events like the University Welcome event for postgraduate researchers. We haven't had a dedicated postgraduate training space like this before'. The formal training delivery aspect of the Hub is working extremely well. Research Support and Research Data Management teams have also run well-attended training for postgraduate researchers on how to raise the visibility of research and research data management essentials. The physical Hub space has become a catalyst for closer working between OD&PL and the library, encouraging more coordinated curriculum planning and a stronger sense of collegiality. As the Hub moves towards its second academic year, we are planning how the space will be used for a wider range of activities for – and led by – researchers. Colleagues from OD&PL have invaluable experience, knowledge and enthusiasm to contribute to this next phase of Hub evolution.

The library's Research Support and Research Data Management teams are based in the Research Hub, which gives us a high-profile location from which to run and develop our research support services. The research support offices are in the midst of the researcher space; congregations of library users work directly outside our offices. Only time will tell how effective the new space is for facilitating partnership with researchers.

One of the objectives of the library's strategy, 'Powering knowledge and opportunity, 2016–2021', focuses on working to better understand research priorities and ways the library can provide support and add value throughout the research lifecycle. The library is working towards understanding the diverse needs of researchers and developing our services, thus ensuring that our service offers are integral, beneficial and relevant.

Currently the Library Research Support and Data Management teams work alongside researchers, supporting several fundamental stages of the research lifecycle. The Research Hub provides a comfortable and professional space in which to conduct a variety of meetings, training and one-to-one support. For example, our information specialists develop literature searches for research projects and often hold meetings with researchers to provide grant application and research project support. The Open Access team manage the institutional repositories and help to ensure researchers meet funder and REF (Research Excellence Framework) requirements. The Research Data Management team help researchers write data management plans – for example, if they are submitting a bid for funding – and work with researchers to prepare research data for sharing via the institution's research data repository. Furthermore, the library offers a range of one-to-one support, from EndNote support to literature searching guidance.

The Research Hub seeks to create atmosphere and a sense of place and belonging for those who frequent it, and to attract those research postgraduates and staff who have yet to engage with it and its research services. It is a place that is neither home nor the office, a place where researchers can work, relax, socialise, showcase their work, share ideas and seek a range of training, advice and support. One challenge is to balance the use of the study space (silent, individual and group rooms) with the desire to foster an environment of interdisciplinary research, networking and collaboration for our researchers.

What do researchers think of the space? As they say, you can't please everyone all of the time. On her first visit to the Hub, one seasoned researcher joked: 'I remember when this was a library!' However, this type of reaction has been the

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exception. Other comments gathered on the Hub white board wall include: 'postgraduate heaven', 'huge improvement –really love the new space', and the rather plaintive: 'nice change from a lonely office'. Like many of our other libraries, the Hub has many requests for 24x7 opening, and there is more demand for PCs than we had anticipated as we had assumed that most visitors would want to work on their own device.

When the creation of the space was first discussed, there was some concern that it might be underused; in fact, the Hub is very busy. Since opening in September 2016, the study spaces have been extensively used, primarily by taught postgraduate students, and we have reached 100% occupancy on several occasions. Access to the Hub is by swipe card, and between October 2016 and January 2017 we recorded over 60,000 people entering, 92% of whom were taught postgraduates.

As part of the library strategy, we are undertaking a consultation with researchers to investigate how they want to use the Research Hub in the future, and to engage them in developing and delivering a programme of events and activities that facilitate interdisciplinary research collaboration and are targeted at postgraduate researchers and staff.

The challenge now is how to create an environment that supports both postgraduate researchers and research staff in their work and myriad activities. Space is not static, but shaped by how its inhabitants use and interact with it. Uses for the Research Hub will grow and change over time as researchers – with their different needs, attitudes and priorities – imprint on the space. The library will adapt, continuously.

Note

Researcher@Library: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThbYRgyYa64&t=4s&list=PL4PSr5RRxgLHElQq296fw5tl_JrZ_ccFn&index=3

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