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The Learning Grid at the University of Warwick: a library innovation to support learning in higher education

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Colleagues often ask, 'what is The Learning Grid?' and 'why is it different?' The following article aims to highlight the unique elements of this library facility and also to present some of the key areas of development that continue to evolve since its opening in September 2004.

The Learning Grid was designed and is managed by the University Library. This meant that the University Librarian had direct input into the design and concept for the space that measures approximately 1350m². Because the space was identified as an opportunity to provide students at Warwick with a unique learning experience, the need to work in collaboration with other support services was essential in exploring the aims and objectives of this facility, as well as its design. Architects from MacCormack, Jamieson, Prichard (MJP), London, were integral to the development process, ensuring that draft designs reflected the evolving concepts for the purpose of the space and activities that would take place within it.

The Learning Grid is a technology-rich, flexible and informal learning environment. It is open 24x7, and is closed only on Christmas Day, so students are able to access its services and facilities virtually at any time. The Learning Grid has a capacity for approximately 300 people and its range of resources aims to support a diversity of learning preferences. It has the ability to blend together the traditional and technological; and

more significantly, provides users with the ability to work collaboratively, to be able to engage with discussion, debate and the pragmatic development of study, transferable and professional skills.

The facility supports various elements of the institutional mission, including:

- to equip our graduates with the necessary education and skills to make a significant contribution to the economy and society as a whole
- to recruit students with outstanding potential and to provide the best support and facilities to foster teaching, learning and research of the highest quality.

The Learning Grid is located in University House which is offset slightly from Central Campus and the main library but is co-located with other university support services. Careers, Academic Support Services, Counselling, Welfare, Advice and Guidance are all physically interconnected and the working relationships established at conception for the project continue to feed into the way the service develops.



As the actual physical space was originally open plan offices, it was essential for the Grid to enhance its aesthetics with key architectural features. These included a feature staircase, maximising the use of natural and artificial light and the installation of curvy screens to informally break up the space whilst integrating the use of colour. Complemented by the addition of dramatic pieces of art, the Learning Grid has a professional look and feel. Unlike other learning facilities, paper notices are not permitted, but rather essential user information is communicated through alternative means, essentially plasma screens. As well as 24x7 access to a range of learning technologies: plasma stations, SMART boards, Cleverboards, document visualisers, video edit suites, PCs, wireless networks and practice presentation facilities. The Learning Grid also hosts a 10,000 core text reference only collection. The range of collaborative and individual work areas as well as

mobile screens, whiteboards and OHPs allow the environment to be incredibly flexible, allowing students to manipulate their environment to suit their learning activities.



In contrast to the University of Warwick's main library, students are able to have hot and cold drinks as well as cold food in the Learning Grid. Together with the ability to use a mobile phone and an environment specifically designed to support collaborative working, the Learning Grid has demonstrated itself to be a valuable university library resource. Raw entrance data indicates a 35% usage in comparison to the main library, which is ten times its size. During the vacation periods, entrances to the Learning Grid actually exceed that to the central facility.



The Learning Grid allows students to be creative, to experiment with new and different study methods, to apply a range of resources to support their learning experiences and to seek constructive advice and guidance on a range of related

issues. The role of the student adviser is a key element to the positive experiences students have within the space. As current students and recent graduates of the university, the student advisers are professionally trained to facilitate the learning of their peers. The student adviser is the first point of contact for Grid users and is equipped with best practice principles in the delivery of advice and guidance, adult learning theory and tutoring skills. Because The Learning Grid has no fixed traditional help desk, Advisers wear blue T-shirts and it is their responsibility to be visible on both floors of the Grid, to be stopped at any time and to be able to respond to a range of queries. At a basic level these relate to facilitating the use of Grid resources and IT software packages, helping people how to navigate the library's resources and referring users to the right level of support provision within the university. That may be to the Learning Grid's drop-in provision, where experts are available in the space to offer specialist, bite-size, context-driven advice and guidance, or more broadly to a course that might be running by a particular support service in the coming weeks. Naturally therefore, the role of the adviser includes an element of diagnosis to make sure the user has a best-fit solution to their query as quickly as possible.



All student advisers are selected for their commitment and enthusiasm to support the learning of their peers. Their feedback and creativity feeds directly into the development of the service and their ability to work as a team becomes evident through the delivery of a consistent practice model and an exemplary level of customer service. The development of inclusive practice is at the core of the Grid's service model. The ability to be able to support diversity effectively within an international environment is critical to an enhanced student experience. This is emphasised further through recognising that skills sets no longer sit in isolation and that learning must be viewed more holistically. In doing so –and as has been demonstrated through experiences at the Learning Grid– some of the barriers to students

seeking advice about a range of issues in one spot can greatly enhance a person's advancement with their learning. This provision is highly innovative and contributes greatly to the effectiveness of the Learning Grid as a learning environment.

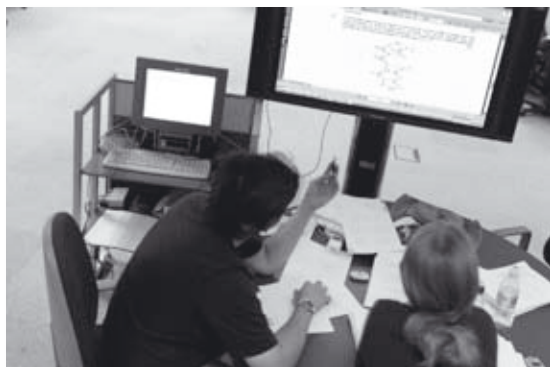


The service model to support the space contributes directly to the way users are encouraged to manage the space themselves and is constantly evolving to better meet the needs of the Warwick community. A culture of reciprocal user respect for differing learning styles and an emphasis on the requirement to share resources has created a profound sense of student ownership for the space. The lack of an authoritarian staff presence means that staff support can blend in and out of the space successfully throughout the 24x7 period, and that the space continues to hold its integrity whilst 'unstaffed'.

During the Learning Grid's two years of operation, evaluation data has been gathered using a variety of methods. From activities that have been conducted, three key themes have emerged that highlight the importance of having a resource such as the Learning Grid. The first reinforces the importance of comfort elements: the ability to work within a high quality environment that has a professional finish; being able to access a book whilst enjoying a coffee; the relative importance of air conditioning; access to a water cooler and being able to manipulate the environment. The second theme emphasises the elements of value and ownership. Students who benefit from the Learning Grid feel that they have been invested in, that the design and configuration of the environment allows the first year undergraduate to feel as important to the institution as the leading academic. In addition to this, the way the space is managed allows students to feel like the space is theirs to apply to their learning in a way that suits them. By instilling this sense of ownership, not only does it encourage students to look after the space and respect it but is also reflected in their attitude to learning; the concept of ownership is extended to the development of themselves

as independent adult learners. Finally and most exciting, is the assertion that having a resource like the Learning Grid available actually improves motivation to study. Evidence suggests that this is achieved in a variety of ways depending on the individual, but is complemented by comments relating to improved scholarly success through having access to the Grid, its resources and the opportunities it offers students to be creative and exploratory with their learning techniques.

As a complementary, holistic and flexible library service for Warwick, the Learning Grid is well placed to support developments within the sector. Research-led learning, student-centred learning, problem-based learning, personal development planning and collaboration are all themes that are supported by this facility and its service model. Through becoming embedded as a library service and as a complementary broader support service, the Learning Grid is beginning to explore with individual academics the potential of integrating the use of the space directly into particular modules. Working in collaboration with the university's e-learning team, Centre for Academic Practice and the library's Academic Support Service, opportunities to support curriculum innovation are providing valuable insights of the benefits of drawing together library services and alternative teaching methods. This has led to a substantial impact on the student learning experience and allowed a new and emerging relationship between libraries and the curricula to develop.



The Learning Grid is beginning to represent a paradigm shift in relation to the development of library services. Rather than focusing on a resource that is managed, future developments are beginning to take into consideration a student-centred approach that enables students to navigate the rapidly changing and wide range of resources available to them. Through working in partnership with other support services it is also allowing the library to place itself at the centre of the learner experience, in a position to facilitate the development of information literacy

and employability skills in a way that supports the pedagogy and expectations of the twenty-first century learner. This has been reflected in recent developments at the University of Warwick, which supported the opening of the BioMed Grid, a Learning Grid satellite facility specifically for medical and biological science students at Gibbet Hill campus. In addition, the introduction of the Learning Grid is providing a cornerstone for other campus and service developments.



Since The Learning Grid has opened, it has attracted a lot of interest from a number of other national and international institutions. Developments at the University of Warwick have begun to significantly shape the thinking of other university

library departments that are beginning to pursue the development of similar facilities.

The responsive nature of the Learning Grid is allowing staff and students at the University of Warwick to continually develop their thinking about learning, service provision and the way courses can be delivered. This coming academic year, we look forward to the introduction of new technologies and new ideas; continued evaluation to allow us to shape future developments and better meet the learning needs of the individuals within our academic community. The possibilities that a resource like the Learning Grid is able to offer us are boundless, the question right now is 'where will it end?'

