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Jul 7th, 12:00 AM

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Sagren Moodley  
*Durban University of Technology*

Lucille Webster

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Sagren Moodley and Lucille Webster, "Repurposing library space: How the teaching and development grant and strategic partnerships made this a reality." *Proceedings of the IATUL Conferences*. Paper 1. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/2015/cel/1>

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# **Repurposing Library Space: How the Teaching and Development Grant and Strategic Partnerships Made this a Reality**

**Lucille Webster**

**Director Library Services**

**Durban University of Technology.**

**Durban 4000**

**KwaZulu Natal, South Africa [websterl@dut.ac.za](mailto:websterl@dut.ac.za)**

**Sagren Moodley**

**Manager: IT, Innovation & Development**

**Durban University of Technology**

**Durban**

**4000**

**KwaZulu Natal, South Africa [Sagren@dut.ac.za](mailto:Sagren@dut.ac.za)**

## **Abstract**

The main thrust of the Durban University of Technology Strategic Plan 2012-2014 was to establish a conducive learning environment by repurposing the physical learning environments in the main library. The aim was to create a space that was flexible and customizable, safe and secure, and enhanced and supported different learning approaches.

Over the past decade or more, academic libraries have undergone dramatic changes in both the physical and virtual environments. Most of these changes have been driven in part by the changing landscape of higher education and to some extent due to the impact of the rapid development of information and communication technology. Not only have these changes altered the traditional shape of academic libraries but has also lead to increased expectations of library services and facilities from library users.

The Durban University of Technology Library has grappled for some time with attempts to modernize the library and make the space inviting. The original library has morphed over the years from a single floor to a four storey building with too many stacks and not enough spaces that are conducive for learning. The footprint of the library stacks have shrunk due to the reduction in print books and periodicals and most of the seating arrangements were archaic and uncomfortable at best. Costs was a major factor that had to be considered in our attempts to repurpose the library into a student centered space and place.

An opportunity to apply for the Teaching and Development Grant proved to be the catalyst that would set the library on the path to develop a blueprint to revitalize our space as a learning hub. This paper will track the journey the Library embarked on and how the Teaching and Development Grant opened the way for effective partnerships both in and outside the university that ultimately contributed to our aim of creating a modern and appropriate Library space.

## **Keywords**

Academic libraries, renovations, space repurposing, library buildings, learning spaces

## **Introduction**

The Durban University of Technology (DUT) can trace its roots back to more than a hundred years as an institution of vocational and higher education. The university is the result of a voluntary merger between two technikons, M L Sultan Technikon and Technikon Natal, the first of the tertiary sector mergers in South Africa almost thirteen years ago. DUT is a medium-size inner-city institution straddling two cities, Durban and Pietermaritzburg. It comprises six faculties on two centres (Durban and Midlands), viz, Accounting and Informatics; Applied Sciences; Arts and Design; Engineering and the Built Environment; Health Sciences; and Management Sciences.

The university is mainly an undergraduate university with 97% of the 26 000 students registered for national diplomas and first degrees. Our students are predominantly first generation university students and only 16% of them use English, which is the language of instruction, as a home language. In the past six years, there has been a focus on research, and research support. Our research output has grown significantly over the past years, and recently, according to a study conducted by Mouton (2014) in which he compared the research of selected universities of technologies in South Africa, indexed in the Thomson Reuters Web of Science, he found that that DUT had the highest percentage of papers in the Web of science (76%) in the last cycle.

To support the learning, teaching and research objectives of the University, six site libraries are located at six of the seven teaching sites. Eighty full-time staff, and approximately eighty part-time student library assistants service the libraries on an average of 15 hours per day at the main sites. A significant proportion (35 %) of the staff are in professional positions, and an equal number make up the para-professional staff. Over 90 % of the staff work at the two main Library sites in Durban. The two site libraries in the Midlands are about 85 kilometers away from the main libraries, and these libraries will be undergoing massive expansions in the next two years, which will double seating capacity and library space. These infrastructural changes alongside changes in information behavior offers the opportunity to transform into true learning spaces.

## **Changes in the academic environment**

The last two decades has seen more changes in the academic library than in its entire history. Rapid advances in technology and the evolution of information access has created higher expectations from faculty and students. The impact of new teaching and learning modes has influenced the way students and academics discover the information they need.

This changing landscape in higher education alongside the rapid growth in the digital learning environments have altered the traditional shape of libraries. The size of the library's collection is no longer of relevance; greater emphasis is now on the accessibility of information using diverse technologies, from anytime, anywhere. While access becomes critical, so does the need for constant assessment, and allocation of resources to support changes in student enrollment and the demands of a digital environment. The impact of this increased access to the environment is evident in the downward circulation of print resources, and changes in the physical and virtual spaces and services. In essence, it implies a change in *what we support, and how we support*.

## **Positioning the academic library for success**

If you asked a library administrator in South Africa, what the main challenge facing their local library was, you are likely to get a response that makes references to a shrinking budgets or an inadequate budget to meet objectives. Whilst this may be the case, these challenges are usually mitigated by the state of relationships and connectedness the library has within the parental institution, and also the library's ability to source third stream income. The status enjoyed by a library is dependent on the type of support the library receives from the University Executives and whether they understand the library business and the need for realistic annual increments in the budget; academics who understand the need to integrate their academic programme with the library; library staff who drive

critical processes and service delivery of a high standard which contributes to the overall success of the student; and students who have the understanding of the role the library plays in their academic journey. A combination of these factors is a rare achievement, but if it did exist, the library would be uniquely positioned to lay claim to funds when needed, in line with changes in the academic climate.

The DUT Library is uniquely embedded within the academic ambit of the university, bringing with it many advantages, but also disadvantages. The competition for financial resources more often than not favours the Faculties within the ambit, leaving the library with a minimum increase, despite sustained pleas for increases to fund critical resources, facilities, and services. This has applied to both operational and capital expenditure. The availability of capital funding for infrastructural development has not been forthcoming since 2011, placing constraints on renewal of computer equipment and new library developments. Unfortunately, the institution has not been in a position to extend the budget offering, and the library has had to critically reflect on its collection and services in order to respond to the institutional vision of becoming a student centered university.

### **Engaging with a student- centred philosophy**

Under the leadership of the current Vice-Chancellor, a new *Strategic Plan (2015 – 2019)* has just been finalized. This plan amplifies and expands the goals and objectives from the previous plan (*Strategic Goals and Objectives (2009 to 2018)*) whilst embracing the dynamic environment of the University in particular, higher education in general and the socio-economic context in which it finds itself.

The four strategic focus areas that form the basis of the *Strategic Plan (2015 – 2019)* are:

- Building sustainable student communities of living and learning;
- Building research and innovation for development;
- Building a learning organisation;
- Building a sustainable university.

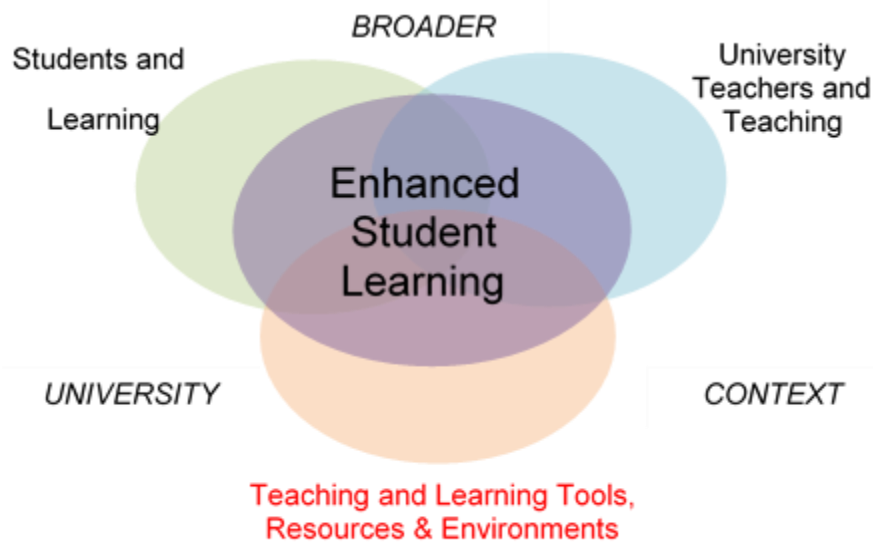
Each focus area is further expanded into strategic objectives which provide a framework for action. The *Strategic Plan (2015 – 2019)* lists a number of purposes for the existence of DUT. Of relevance to this institutional submission is the need to improve the life chances of our students and help them reach their maximum potential. As a student-centred and an engaged university, DUT has committed itself to provide its students with the kind of learning environment that helps them grow intellectually, socially and emotionally (DUT QEP Submission, 2014). A supportive infrastructure and environment are crucial to student success, and the library is committed to fulfilling its role in contributing to student success – this is evident in our strategic thinking and future direction.

The Library is committed to being a student centered facility that enhances learning, teaching and research through the provision of information services, access policies and instruction programmes in line with the objectives of the university. The thrust of the Library's strategic plan 2012 -2014, was to establish a conducive learning environment by improving the physical learning environments. The focus was on creating library spaces that were flexible and customizable, safe and secure, and that enhanced different learning approaches. Other objectives included consolidating library collections, create additional space, and very importantly, reduce noise levels in the library; a problem created by poorly designed spaces. With no infrastructural funding since 2011, the library was constrained in terms of fulfilling its strategic objectives

## Accessing the Teaching and Development Grant to repurpose library spaces

In 2007, in an unprecedented move, the university put a call to non-academic departments to access funding from the Department of Higher Education. The Teaching and Development Grant (TDG) was implemented to improve teaching and learning, and was primarily destined for Faculty use. The grant itself has specific objectives, and accessing the funds is based on an institutional submission, and this is further allocated within the institution to support the strategic objectives of the University.

The TDG objective was to enhance student learning in ways that would lead to student success through a sustained focus on improving the quality and impact of university teachers, teaching and teaching resources and creating a conducive environment to ultimately improve the graduation rates. Sub-objectives of the TDG grant were to support activities to ensure that students from previously marginalized groups, and underprepared students had a greater chance of succeeding in their university studies; as well as activities that promoted the scholarship of teaching and learning; enhanced the status and importance of teaching at universities; and improved the learning environment. Figure 1 graphically represents the objectives of the TDG funding.



**Figure 1: Teaching and Development Grant objectives**

Relying on previous success in accessing TDG funds, the library submitted a TDG proposal for funding in 2012. The library TDG proposal for “Enhancing academic integrity” (2007), and “Creating a culture of reading (2010) was widely supported by the academic community as it addressed gaps within the academic programme. The successful implementation of these projects, and the impact on student learning enhanced our ‘status’ within the institution, and provided further opportunities for academic engagement, and strategic partnerships within the institution.

The Library’s TDG proposal (2012) focused on three important and related goals. Firstly, in support of the institutional student centered philosophy, the library proposed strategies to improve the student experience, in particular to support e-learning and to accommodate the diverse learning styles of our students. Secondly, to effectively support the academic programme, the Information Literacy (IL) Programme needed to be re-aligned, and the skills for subject librarians needed to be developed to effectively engage with the e-learning objectives of the institution. Finally, and the most critical of the goals was to promote graduate success in DUT by creating a revitalized learning hub in the library.

The TDG funds were allocated to the library under specific conditions, and unfortunately, only a third of the budget was allocated for space repurposing. The TDG funds were allocated over a four year period (2012-2015), releasing funds annually as required. At this stage, it was clear that these funds would not be able to complete the space projects that we had envisaged, and that the space repurposing exercise would become a phased-in approach. The BM Patel Library, one of the main libraries was nominated as the pilot project on which the other libraries would be developed.

### **Repurposing space at the BM Patel Library**

The architecture of the BM Patel Library proved to be challenging. Re-designed in the 1980's to become a library, it grew from a single floor to four floors with little consideration for effective space utilization. There was a lack of flow of the library, with library collections spread across three floors, parts of the collection were inaccessible by disabled library users, and the design contributed to a noisy library environment.

A number of interventions were initiated simultaneously so that the deadlines for the use of TDG funds were adhered to. Firstly, a space committee with specific terms of reference was set-up by library management. The committee was tasked to engage in research into teaching and learning spaces in academic libraries, with the focus mainly on how academic libraries have become spaces and places for learning and the creation of knowledge. At the same time, the library engaged the services of a local architect who had worked on contemporary academic library designs. Data from previous library and institutional surveys (2010 -2012) and feedback regarding current library space, services and facilities were also retrieved.

The research conducted by the committee was exhaustive; the data from student feedback was analyzed; observations of students in the libraries by library staff were documented formally; and a number of design principles were explored before engagement with the architect.

From the literature study, there was sufficient information and pictures of what the academic library of the future should look like. The general principles include green and sustainable buildings, well designed interiors, and the need for natural light and open spaces. The committee was cautious as to not design learning spaces with service and operational considerations in mind, but rather to focus on the "character of the learning that should happen in the library space". The library learning environment of the future needs to be "flexible, inspiring, supportive of effective teaching and learning, involve the users and the wider community, and support other learning places" (Bennet, 2007).

Understanding the fundamental reasons as to when and how students will engage with learning spaces is critical.

Cunningham and Tabur (2012) refers to a hierarchy of learning space attributes designed by Fred Kent, an architect. His design provides a framework of learning attributes (see Figure 2) that is linked to Maslow hierarchy of needs theory. The most basic characteristic is access and linkages at the bottom of the pyramid. Once this attribute meets the primary realistic needs of students, they will then look to see if the space also meets their ascending needs of varied learning and social activities. A learning space which not only has these attributes but also possesses the fourth and highest level attribute of comfort and feel will distinguish itself as an ideal learning space.

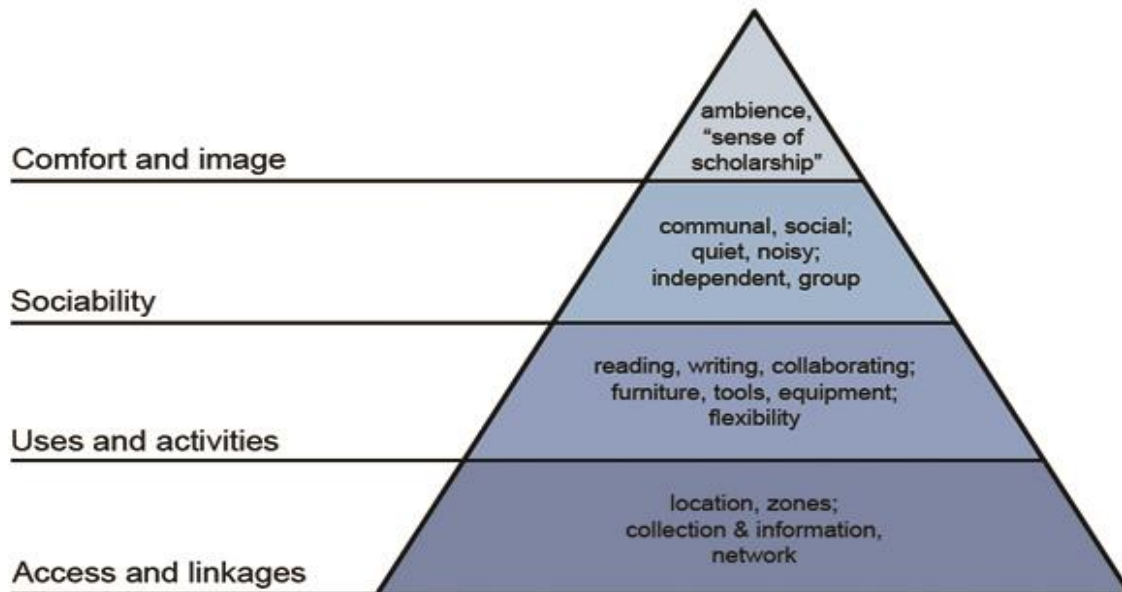


Figure 1. Hierarchy of learning space attributes

**Figure 2: Hierarchy of learning space attributes**

Taking into account the learning space attributes, the committee used commonly agreed design principles that include “comfort, aesthetic, flow, equity and blend” to design the library space. The library space should maximize natural lighting, have comfortable chairs, be wheel-chair friendly, and should merge technology into the existing and new spaces. Specifically, for the BM Patel Library, the following was included in the design blueprints:

- Improving the visibility of critical services
- Using high priority spaces/areas for students
- Improve flow, and traffic to minimize noise
- Consolidate collection
- Dedicated technology floor, with IT user support
- Casual seating areas/ Merge technology in seating spaces
- Noise free floor/study floor
- Postgraduate floor
- Integrated spaces for teaching and learning partners

Based on the funds available from TDG, the library has completed phase one of the project which has transformed the library space. Library users are welcomed by an inviting environment to which many students (from the feedback) previously found intimidating and unfriendly. The issue desk has moved from its traditional position of authority on the ground floor, and replaced by a welcoming information desk. Students are seen working comfortably in the casual seating areas, and the technology integrated areas within and outside the library. The collection is merged onto a single floor, and access to the library, and the collection for the disabled has been addressed. Noise management has become less of a problem, as the noise is now limited to the lower floors of the library, making the upper two levels for study, and postgraduate studies. When funding becomes available, the next phase of the space project includes a tea garden, and a 24/7 study centre on the ground floor of the library. The flexibility of spaces and furniture has lent itself to the integration of other learning support units and services within the library.



**Figure 3: Ground floor of the BM Patel Library**

### **Strategic partners in the newly designed spaces**

Strategic partnerships with Faculties, other academic support partners, and industry leading technology companies is moving the library towards becoming an integrated learning space and centre. The newly formed Writing Centres are prominently located in the libraries providing support for students. Our newest partner, the Confucius Institute, house their Media Cultural Centre, which consists of text and media, in the library, providing an additional teaching and learning facility.

An initiative by the SRC in 2013 led to the sponsorship of 100 laptops (with laptops charging units) to the library to loan to students. To support this, the Library, and the Information Technology Department created an IT student support centre within the library, which provides support for WIFI, devices, and other IT related issues experienced by students.

Also, in 2013, the Apple Group sponsored 15 iPads for teaching and learning. Whilst the technology was provided by Apple, the furnishing of the iPad laboratory was funded by the by various faculties of DUT.

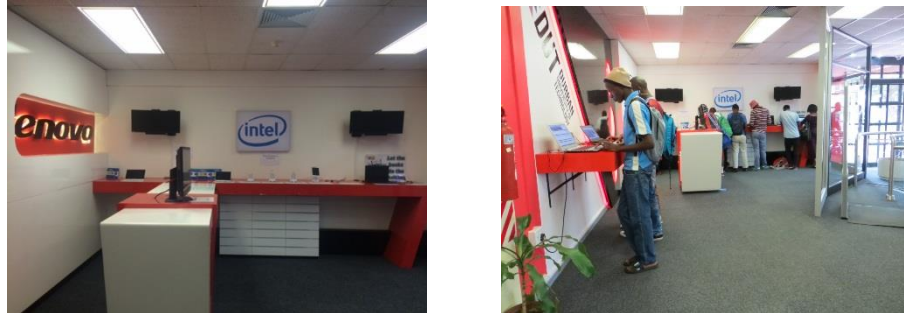
Faculties who supported the vision of the library, and the university to promote the use of technology in teaching and learning among students and academics, made available funds to purchase future, carpets and a uniquely designed wall.



**Figure 4: iPad Laboratory**



The library has become a conducive environment for partnerships. In 2014, technology giants, Lenovo, established a fully funded technology centre at the BM Patel Library. This facility is a first for Lenovo, and is intended for students to “learn while they play”.



**Figure 5: Lenovo Technology Centre**

### **Conclusion**

The library successfully utilized TDG funding in the 2012-2013 cycle, and was granted an allocation in 2014 - 2015. These monies were used mainly to achieve the other library TDG objectives. However, a percentage of the funds were used to repurpose space at the Alan Pittendrigh Library one of the other main libraries. Whilst the design, plans and acquisition of furniture is complete, the allocated space for the library expansion is not available as yet. In May 2015, due to successful implementation of TDG projects, and use of TDG funds, the library was allocated a further TDG allocation to repurpose space at other site libraries.

The library has managed to convert traditionally ineffective spaces into spaces that are engaging, and appealing to the modern library user. This is due to the ability of the library to understand and embrace the University’s ethos of student centeredness; to creatively access, and use TDG funds within a teaching and learning framework; to form strategic partnerships to support, promote, and further teaching and learning; to respond efficiently to challenges in the academic environment. The process of evaluating the changes in the library is ongoing.

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