2018

Staff and student experiences of education space

A REPORT FOR THE PROGRAMME BOARD FOR EDUCATION SPACE
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Introduction

During the academic year 2017-18, academics, students and administrative staff were consulted on their experiences of education space (i.e. space used for teaching, studying, or examinations). This work was undertaken on behalf of the Programme Board for Education Space (PBES) which is overseeing work to improve the use and management of spaces for teaching, studying, and sitting examinations across the University. You can read more about the Board on its website: www.educationspace.cam.ac.uk

Aims

The aim of the work was to find out, both generally and specifically, what staff and students value about the spaces they use and what they would like to see improved. Information about specific spaces that are particularly bad (or good) would be used to help the PBES prioritize its short-term improvement work, while more general findings would be used to improve long-term planning around education space.

Summary of activities

Elected **student** representatives on Faculty and department boards were given the opportunity to attend a one-off focus group on Tuesday 20 February. Forty-one signed up and 29 attended on the day, a mixture of undergraduates and postgraduates from both AHSS and STEM subjects. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education gave a presentation about the education space agenda at the University, and the students gave feedback on their own experiences through post-it note and discussion activities.

Academics were given the opportunity to attend a one-off focus group on Tuesday 29 May. Twenty-eight signed up and a further nine expressed interest but couldn't make the date; three of these submitted written evidence, which has been included in analysis of the focus group results. Activities at the focus group were similar to those at the student event. Two further academics submitted their views via a webform on the Education Space website.

The Head of Student Operations presented on the work of the PBES at **administrator** meetings in five of the six Schools (a separate approach was agreed with Clinical Medicine), reaching a good proportion of departmental administrators and teaching support staff across the University. Departmental administrators in all Schools except Arts and Humanities (which chose to be represented by HSS) were invited to be part of a small administrators' advisory group on education space and ten staff volunteered; this group met on 21 May. In addition, several administrators in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences were convened by the Assistant Secretary of the School and form a small advisory group for matters specifically to do with that School.

Outcomes

All the meetings had a positive tone: academic staff and students in particular appreciated being informed and consulted. Administrative staff were generally interested, but also aware of the significant challenges facing the project. Administrators who took part in the advisory group were happy to give their time, but some made it clear that they were being 'good citizens' rather than seeing a direct benefit as a result of their participation.

Note on analysis

Feedback from the academic and student focus groups was processed using qualitative data analysis software, which helped to identify key themes in this large volume of data and enabled the production of the charts in the appendices. All other data was analysed manually.

Summary of Results

This is a high-level summary of the most significant shared concerns of the different demographics. For more detail on specific institutions, types of space, or attributes of space, see the Appendices.

Students

The condition and comfort of spaces attracted comment from all students: old, dark or dirty spaces were criticized; clean, bright or well-maintained ones praised. There was strong interest in libraries, with students generally praising the quality of Cambridge collections but wanting longer opening hours and access to other Colleges' libraries. Students particularly value libraries or other study spaces where they can take in food/drink, and where there are spaces for group discussion. Graduate students stressed the value to them of dedicated work spaces with facilities nearby for both relaxing and conducting supervisions. Students were more likely than other groups to suggest reforms to teaching as well as space, asking for more lecture capture, more varied exams, and more chances to interact with and learn from older students/postgraduates.

Academics

Academics were concerned with the ownership of space, particularly as it relates to cleanliness and the provision of AV support (they want to know that someone is on hand to help lectures start on time). Several criticised the state of centrally managed spaces, such as the Sidgwick Lecture Block. They were also concerned about access to rooms; several reported having been unable to get suitable spaces for the kind of teaching they wanted to do and some were concerned that greater centralised control of space might exacerbate this problem. They stressed the problem for students of successive lectures in non-adjacent locations, asking for student travel time to be taken into account in scheduling decisions. Academics were more wary than other groups of sharing space across departmental lines, stressing the value of specialist teaching spaces and disciplinary communities in departments, and worrying about the potential of 'hub' teaching space models to make life difficult for departments or Triposes that straddle disciplinary boundaries. While welcoming the work and vision of the PBES, academics wanted to know about continuity planning that would help mitigate disruption during major long-term build and refurbishment projects.

Administrative staff

A very significant concern was the need for clear management and support models for shared space: administrators wanted to know how the University would ensure that rooms were properly maintained and serviced if local management was removed. Administrators often asked if College spaces were in scope of the PBES, and referred to the timetabling problems caused by academics or Colleges insisting on supervision teaching at certain times: these staff saw the problem of timetabling in University space as inextricable from the wider teaching ecosystem in Cambridge (and hence stressed that improving space utilisation would involve significant cultural change across collegiate Cambridge). Another topic that drew comment was the Scheduling and Modelling project: administrators were very interested in how it could help them, but emphasized their frustration at being asked to provide the same data several times in different formats. Administrators from Technology and HSS particularly stressed the need to take location and travel time into account when timetabling students in cross-departmental Triposes. Staff from several Schools asked for sharing of best practice across the University and more opportunity to learn from what colleagues in other Schools and departments were doing.

Conclusion and impact on the Programme Board's work

The main factors that contribute to negative experiences of education space are: spaces in poor condition or that are unfit for purpose; insufficiencies of certain kinds of space (graduate study space, for example, or space for group study/collaborative work); and the difficulties involved in finding space and scheduling teaching in a way that works for all parties.

These are all issues that the Programme Board for Education Space (PBES) is aware of and is working towards improving. This analysis of staff and student feedback therefore confirms the Board's sense of the most important work to be done, as well as offering valuable detail on specific spaces or issues that need to be addressed (see Appendices).

The Programme Board received and endorsed this report at its meeting on 23 July 2018. Below are some of the specific ways in which the Board is responding to the concerns raised.

1. Facilities and technology that do what they are needed to do are a prime concern, particularly for academic staff. The Board is aware of this issue, which has also emerged from reports it has received on School education needs. Over the long vacation 2018 the Board is preparing a **minimum performance specification** for education space: during the academic year 2018-19 centrally bookable space (and other key lecture theatres) will be audited against this specification and a programme of works proposed to **improve substandard facilities**. The Board is aware that requirements vary by discipline, and Schools will be able to feed in to the specification for their area.

2. The management issues arising from increased sharing of space are a major concern for academics and administrators: how might or should financial and practical responsibilities for spaces change if the management responsibility changes, and how can quality be maintained? The Board notes this concern and will make **consideration of management issues** a priority. As a first step, it has asked for a paper on this matter to come to its October meeting.

3. Academic and administrators raised concerns about the difficulties of finding appropriate space, and of constructing timetables that work for all parties. The Board oversees two projects that will help to tackle these issues. The Booker service is a **room booking system** designed specifically for the University that will enable better discovery, booking and sharing of rooms. The Education Space Scheduling and Modelling project will produce a tool that enables the University and departments to **model teaching requirements** against available space, leading both to more efficient timetabling and also to better-informed decisions around the construction/refurbishment/demolition of space.

4. The student feedback on libraries and study space bore out many of the observations made in the Protolib reports, two extensive investigations of study habits among Cambridge students conducted by the Futurelib team at the University Library. Noting the importance of study space to students, and also the usefulness and relevance of the Futurelib team's work, the Board agreed to engage more with the Futurelib team, and to consider adding a **University Library representative** to its membership.

The following appendices attempt to capture some of the detail of feedback given in the student and academic focus groups.

Appendix 1 –Types of space

Cafés. Several cafés were praised as study spaces (the University Centre, Waterstone's, Judge Business School, ARB) and the need for cheap, accessible cafés near teaching hubs was noted in several students' 'ideal day' exercises (the Downing and West Cambridge sites were singled out as deficient in this regard).

Computer suites. Only attracted two comments, both from academics. One said that there was a well-used space in Materials Science on the West Cambridge site, while an academic from the Social Sciences Research Centre asked for more central support in providing computer-based teaching.

Exam halls. Students dislike exam halls that are too hot, or have insufficient space to put down a piece of A4 paper. Academics criticized the use of raked lecture theatres with benches for exams, and also mentioned the need for more computer-based exam facilities.

Graduate study space. Comments mostly from graduate students, especially in AHSS – who appreciate having study space, strongly feel there should be more of it, and criticise small, cramped or dark spaces. One AHSS academic defended the value of graduate study space in their department in strong terms: "I can't express how beneficial it is for forging a real research community, heading off problems, etc. But it is constantly under threat of being removed from us. These places are wonderful! Please talk to us about how important they are!"

Laboratories. Some individual labs were singled out as good (Zoology, Earth Sciences) or bad (Physiology). General comments focused on the need for good ventilation and access ("pinch points" can make some labs very slow to enter/exit). Graduate students also stressed the need for social/relaxation spaces, such as kitchens, in or near their labs.

Lecture theatres. Many comments were on individual lecture theatres (see Appendix 2). Students were generally negative about cramped spaces, small desks, and poor condition. Academics were more likely to focus on problems with management and equipment, stressing the need for working technology, AV support, and clear lines of responsibility for cleaning etc. Some academics in STEM subjects pointed out that traditional lecture theatres are not flexible enough for the kinds of teaching they want to do.

Libraries. Attracted more comment than any other type of space, and overwhelmingly from students. Negative comments were generally about access – students want longer opening hours, digital checkout of materials, and access to other College libraries besides their own. Students appreciate libraries as study spaces (many were singled out as examples of good space), particularly where they can take in food, and where there are areas for group work (several students called for more collaborative space in libraries in their 'ideal day' exercise). Unsurprisingly, students dislike small, cold and dark libraries, and appreciate warm, spacious and bright ones.

Meeting space. Attracted little comment; one or two academics and graduate students felt they didn't have access to enough meeting space.

Small group teaching space. Comments from students generally linked to those about group study spaces in libraries (there should be more of it). Graduate students mostly commented on the

difficulty of finding supervision rooms, while academics commented on the lack of flexible space for seminar-style teaching

Social space. Students appreciate social space where it is provided, and graduate students in particular would like to see more. Both academics and students value spaces where they can meet informally, interact with peers, and enjoy a sense of intellectual community.

Study space. Student evidence on where they like to study bears out the findings of the Protolib reports: a variety of spaces feature, from bedrooms to libraries and cafés. Places which provide several different types of space (e.g. libraries with group work spaces as well as silent rooms) are appreciated, as are places with access to food and drink.

Comments on type of space by discipline

Comments on type of space by role
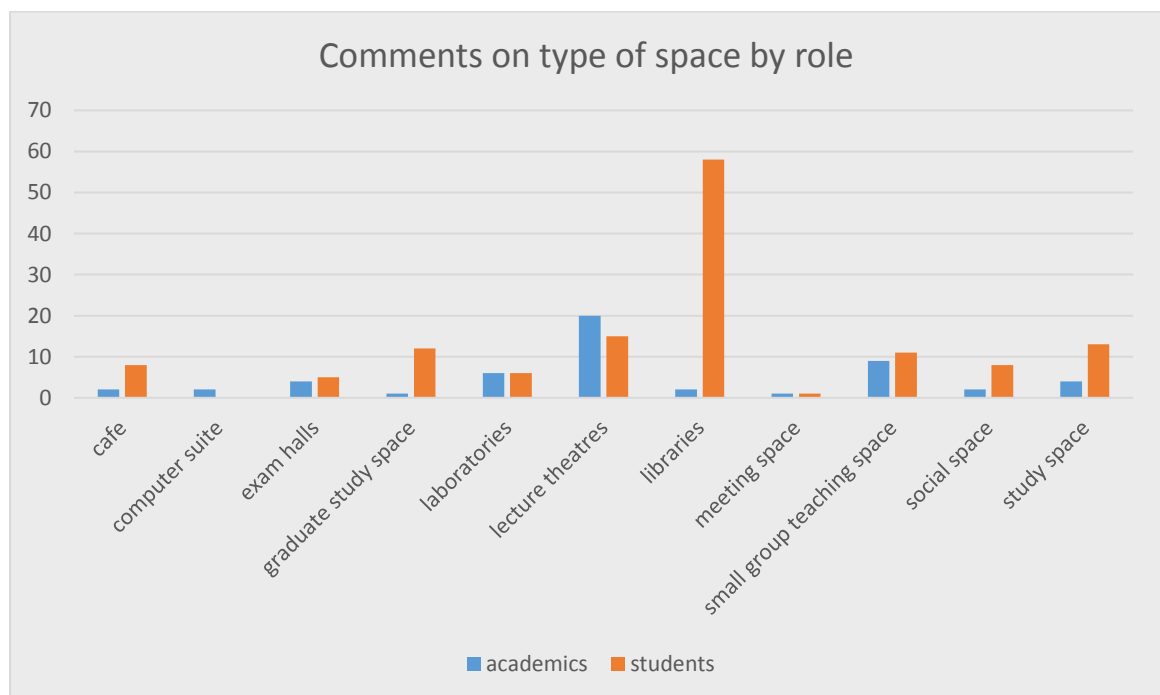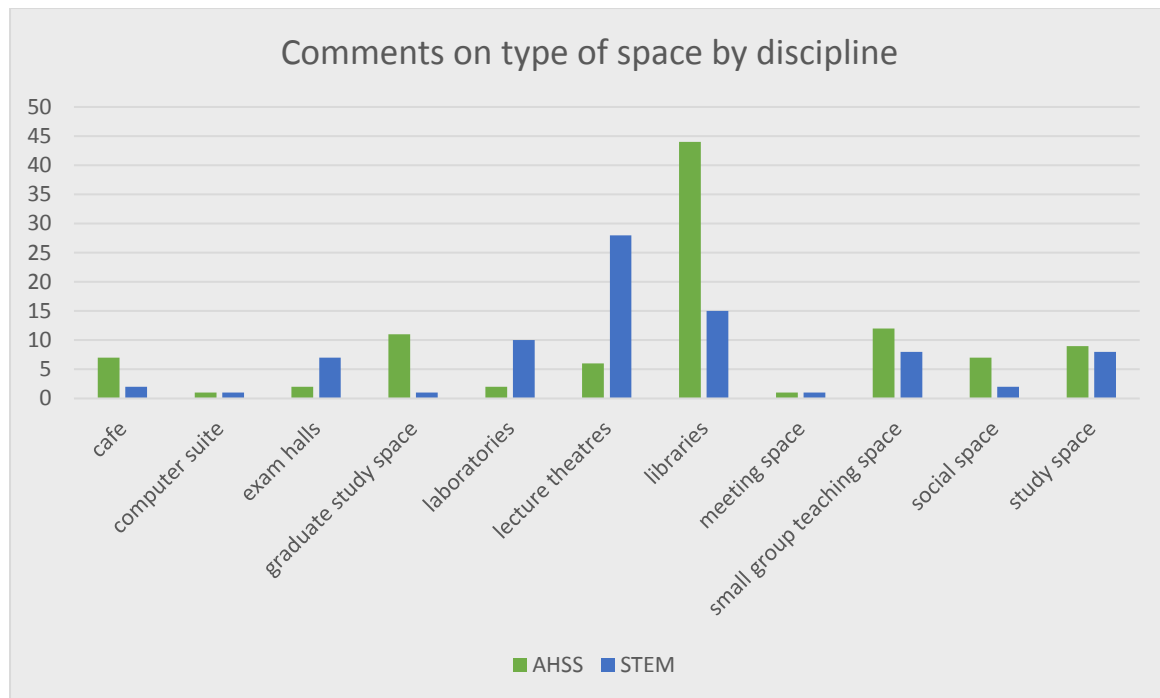
Appendix 2 – Institutions

Forty-nine institutions were mentioned by name in the academic and student focus group feedback. Those that attracted more than five comments are listed below (with the number of comments in brackets), along with a brief account of the feedback received. This feedback will also be shared with the institutions mentioned. Spaces that received particularly positive feedback will be considered for case studies on the Board's website.

Department of Architecture (11) – the prominence of this department is partly a result of skewed data: architecture students were disproportionately represented in the focus group cohort. Nine comments were negative, mostly about problems with the studios (cramped, scruffy, old/broken machinery, lack of storage.) The two positive comments were for the "spacious, well-lit" undergraduate architecture studios.

Babbage Lecture Theatre (7). This received seven comments; not all positive, although it was singled out as "lovely" and "modern, clean, well-lit" with excellent AV staff. The negative comments were for its lack of adjacent coffee machine, noise from nearby building works, and its unsuitability as an exam venue.

Cockcroft Lecture Theatre (6). Three comments focused on discomfort and poor condition ("access and parking poor, old, unloved, dusty, sense of decay, poor student experience" said one) and another on the lack of a coffee machine. One commended its wide desks for note-taking, and an academic asked about the planned replacement, stressing the need for it to be raked.

Faculty of Law (7). Six comments were encomiums for the Law Library (bright, good ventilation nice chairs, good collections, helpful staff, extension leads) and one also praised the Law lecture rooms as bright and spacious.

Sidgwick Lecture Block (12). More than half of comments focused on the generally poor condition of the Lecture Block (everything from uncomfortable temperatures to ripped curtains and broken lecterns). Others complained about its unsuitability for certain kinds of teaching (benches are not good for exams or seminars) and the difficulty of getting an appropriately sized teaching room, leading to overcrowding. Academics also complained about the poor AV provision and lack of support, leading to lectures running late.

Centre for Mathematical Sciences (7). Five comments were general praise for the CMS – as "modern, designed for the task" with "great library, great common workspaces, great offices". One commenter singled out the wide desks for praise and another the 24-hour access.

Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages (7). Three comments were praise for the library as friendly, well-stocked, and with excellent staff. The others, all from academics, were about the lack of common space and space for small group teaching in the Raised Faculty Building – "staff aren't 'housed' so no intellectual sociability or community into which students can be integrated" said one.

University Library (12). All comments were from students. There was general positivity about the collections, and some appreciation for the variety of spaces and the provision of food. Others found the classification system difficult, or called for better access through self-checkout and longer opening hours.

Other noteworthy institutions or groups of institutions:

There was a concentration of poorly-rated teaching spaces in the **Faculty of Biology on the Downing Site**: a variety of spaces in Anatomy, Physiology, Genetics, Pathology and Psychology all received exclusively negative comment. Positive comments about Biology facilities were reserved for the Biochemistry LT in the Sanger building and Zoology's lecture theatre and teaching lab (none of which is on the Downing Site).

The **Alison Richard Building** clearly works well: it received positive comments on its teaching space, accessibility and comfort.

The libraries of **Darwin** and **Corpus Christi** colleges received several positive comments each.

Study space at **FAMES** appears to be too limited.

Appendix 3 – Attributes of space

Note: this appendix only deals with those attributes that attracted comments in double figures. Attributes that attracted less than ten comments and so have been omitted are: blackboards, noise, safety and storage.

Condition. Many comments identified the condition of rooms (with 'old' or 'scruffy' being the main negative ones and 'modern' or 'clean' the main positives). Academics were more likely than students to provide detailed information about how spaces in poor condition hamper teaching.

Desks. Comments overwhelmingly from students, and strongly indicating the need for big desks: negative comments were for spaces with small desks and positive comments for those with larger ones.

Food/drink. All comments from students, who strongly appreciate study spaces where they can eat and drink, and also like to have affordable, hot food venues reasonably near their teaching/study locations.

Lighting. Much like desks, these comments were mostly from students, and fairly unidirectional: dark spaces are bad, bright spaces are good. Natural lighting is generally appreciated.

Seating. Comments mostly from students and fairly general: negative about "uncomfortable" seating and positive about "comfortable". There isn't much detail on the difference between the two, though old-fashioned lecture theatres with benches are often in the "uncomfortable" category and libraries with computer chairs in the "comfortable" one.

Size. Student comments tended to be fairly brief: negative about insufficient or cramped spaces and positive about large ones. Academic comments were more illuminating about specific places where overcrowding is a problem for delivery of teaching (e.g. the Lecture Block, the Raised Faculty Building, Materials Science, the Department for Medical Genetics).

Technology. The biggest single issue, attracting a variety of comments. Students care mostly about the availability of plug points, though they also note old/poor technology in teaching rooms and computer suites. Many comments from academics focus on insufficient AV provision or support in lecture rooms (though pockets of excellence exist, such as the Babbage): academics want projectors that work, sufficient visualizers/OHPs (in STEM subjects) and AV support handy when they need it to get a lecture started.

Ventilation/heating. Comments mostly from students, who dislike spaces that are too hot/cold/stuffy, and appreciate well-ventilated spaces.

Comments on attributes of space by discipline

Comments on attributes of space by role