

Back Talk — 11 Days, 11 Libraries

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We are going to build a separate learning commons (LC) at the **University of Hong Kong**. Like its cousins across the sea it will strive to be the sort of “one-stop” learning support facility that has become so popular in North America and the UK. We have been working for the past two years on developing a vision for our commons but we are now getting closer to turning the vision and the functional specifications into the blueprints that will lead to brick and mortar. The commons will be just one component of a new campus (remember Hong Kong is a compact city of seven million people on an island and small peninsula) with three mini-towers growing out of an expansive three layer cake/building in which the commons will reside. Consequently, the university decided to send a group of us including architects for a whirlwind tour of newly constructed teaching facilities, libraries, and LC’s in Australia/New Zealand.

Some or all of us visited a total of eleven universities in as many days. We saw a wide range of new teaching and learning spaces. A few universities had a formal LC, most had LC-like components mixed inside or along side libraries, and some had teaching/learning facilities focused on helping students in a particular area of study learn better than before. After looking at all of these I arrived at the following conclusions:

- If you build a LC, it does seem that students will flock to it.
- That is, if you can create a one-stop shopping/learning environment, this bringing together of student social/learning facilities and services, creates an excitement that generates high use.
- Students in Australia and New Zealand seem to readily enjoy spaces where food, friends, computers and the information they access (FFC), as well as easy access to the services students need are all present. We visited one of the earliest LC’s to be established at the **University of Auckland**. While it lacks some of the small and medium sized group study facilities now found in the more recently built facilities, it demonstrates that when you get the FFC elements together, students don’t seem to mind even very crowded conditions in the same way that a rock concert seems to create an atmosphere upon which many young people thrive.
- Shared services (computer labs, language labs, student counseling, teaching support services, etc.) can be integrated under a single roof in a big Wal-Mart like structure or they can with equal success appear as storefronts along with banks, travel agencies, convenience stores, bakeries, hair salons, etc, as long as they all conceptually come together, like a mall.
- Very innovative lecture theatres, classrooms, and small and large group study

facilities are emerging at places like the **University of Queensland** and **Curtain University**. We saw tiered lecture theaters transformed into five levels with mini learning pods on each level where the students could not only all face the teacher, who worked from the center in an almost “theatre in the round” environment, but they could also break out into 4 or 8 or 16 person discussion groups. We also saw this same sort of thing but in a large rectangular room. This year the **University of Queensland’s Carrick Institute** sponsored a conference called the Places and Spaces for Learning Institute. I think, for those interested in doing more than just building buildings, attendance at this sort of program is a must. <http://www.carrickinstitute.edu.au/carrick/go/home/grants/pid/398>

- When LC elements are scattered here and there in a much larger building, including amidst book stacks in a library, the “one-stop” conceptual scheme gets lost to a degree, and it seems the excitement/energy that we saw in a place like the commons at the **University of Auckland** was missing. However, even if this observation that the more LC concepts are concentrated, the more successful one’s learning support facility will be, there are perhaps always going to be exceptions to the rule. Throughout Australia we were advised to go look at the library at the **University of Otago** in New Zealand. Consequently, we changed our schedule and went to see this wonderful six-year old library which is set into a student support mall-like environment. With all of the books and things that signaled this is a library and not an LC, yet it exuded energy and caused me to think this was truly a wonderful learning-support environment. <http://www.library.otago.ac.nz/services/admin/isbnews.html#building>
- Departments in some universities, have established quasi-LC student study spaces designed to improve their learning experience. Their near zero library input level was noticeable with little information management skill seeming to be taught, but they were nonetheless good for the first year engineering students for whom these facilities were designed. Others built these sorts of facilities immediately across a walkway from a library and so access to library programs was handy, if not as integrated as they might have been.



- **Macquarie University Library’s** soon to be realized combination of a LC focused library plus an automated storage and retrieval system (ASRS) may well be a harbinger of the future of libraries. In a new replacement main library, they will put most of their books into ASRS and then use the rest of the space for all the

kinds of innovative small, medium, and larger group study facilities along with collaborative services that we have begun to expect to see in the most advanced LC sites. To determine what other campus support services were needed, they have systematically analyzed what students use most and plan to include these components. <http://www.lib.mq.edu.au/about/newlibrary2010/news.html#vision>

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- There is clearly no single right way of doing everything and innovations abound if you look far enough. In addition to comfortable leisure furniture, we saw chess tables with chess pieces at the **University of Western Australia**. They said they seldom had to replace chessmen. Reminiscent of separate libraries for graduate and undergraduate libraries we saw separate LC’s. In more than one place we saw the use of roving staff members who would wear different colored shirts to make patrons aware of their functions. At two facilities there were child care/nursing mothers’ rooms — for the latter there was a request for a computer. The amount might vary but wireless, power outlets, and data outlets were ubiquitous. Money-wise, at least one institution had implemented a special improved teaching and learning fee to pay for these LC and teaching innovations while others obtained additional income by renting space to the many banking, hair care, convenience store, travel agency, and food outlets, etc., we saw.

While there were exceptions here and there, the trip to these LC’s and libraries with LC-like components told me that this is generally pervasive phenomena in this region of the world. The most obvious exception was the result of a faculty with very traditional ideas of what a library should be like. The library director at this university decided not to fight it but rather to simply introduce these sorts of innovations gradually as the opportunities presented themselves. Now the problem for the **University of Hong Kong** is deciding which of all the things we saw to adapt, to make our own, and to what to include in our “one-stop” learning shop. 🌿