

Evaluation of University of Queensland Library Spaces: Three Case Studies at St Lucia Campus



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INTRODUCTION

- Understanding evolving patterns of students' learning behaviours, space uses & preferences
- Evaluation of spaces in Social Sciences and Humanities (SSHL); Biological Sciences (BSL); and Walter Harrison Law (WHLL) Libraries
- Identifying areas for improvement in SSHL & impacts of refurbishments at BSL & WHLL
- Online survey of "Student Experience of Library Spaces"
- 1505 survey completed, with 1098 responses to open-ended questions

Introduction:

Academic libraries face the challenge to keep pace with change in relation to students' demographics, pedagogy and technology. In doing so, it is important to have an understanding of the evolving patterns of students' learning behaviours, space uses and preferences through ongoing evaluation of library spaces.

The paper reports on an evaluation study of spaces in the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSHL), Biological Sciences (BSL) and Walter Harrison Law (WHLL) Libraries of the University of Queensland (UQ).

This paper presents a study of areas of weakness in existing SSHL spaces, and impacts of the refurbishment of spaces at BSL and WHLL on students' experiences. The findings evidence a link between students' learning experiences and the quality of library spaces.

An online survey, "Students' Experiences and Perceptions of Library Physical Spaces", was designed to collect data from students.

1505 students completed the surveys, with 1098 responses recorded to open-ended questions on why students visited the libraries and the physical characteristics of the spaces that influenced their experiences.

The findings highlight the importance of individual study spaces and propose a number of recommendations in relation to physical space design and management.

BACKGROUND

Major Drivers

- The need to study impacts of space characteristics on library use & to determine the right balance of individual and group study spaces
- Findings of 2012 insyncsurveys

Study Aims

- Determine effectiveness of spaces re students' & faculty's needs
- Identify weakness and strength of library spaces
- Outline evidence-based recommendations

Following a series of refurbishment and space development projects, UQ library recognised the need to study the impacts of study space characteristics on library use and to determine through evidence-based research the right balance of individual and group study spaces.

In our paper, we have listed similar recent evaluation studies carried out in Australian institutions and some other evaluation of library spaces from academic libraries around the world.

Moreover, a review of major findings of the University of Queensland Library Client Survey, carried out by insyncsurveys in 2012, reinforced the need for evaluation of library spaces, and analysis of students' patterns of library space, perceptions and experiences in these spaces. For example, "facilities and equipment" was found to be the third highest priority category for library users (after "information resources" and "library staff"). In terms of the relative importance of certain variables for library users, five variables directly related to library spaces ranking 20, 21, 23, 26 and 27 included, respectively: "Laptop facilities (e.g. Desks, power) in the library meet my need."; "Library signage is clear."; "I can find a place in the library to work in a group when I need to."; "I can find a quiet place in the library to study when I need to."; and "The library is a good place to study."

It was within this context that in February 2013 UQ library commissioned the project with three key aims:

- (1) to determine whether or not the library spaces are effective and responsive to students' and faculty's learning and teaching needs;
- (2) to identify the area of weakness and strength in relation to library spaces; and
- (3) to outline a set of evidence-based recommendations.

The study looked at the quality of physical spaces in all UQ Libraries. However, three libraries at St Lucia campus were selected for in-depth investigation of students' pattern and frequency of space use, satisfaction with the quality of spaces and preference for certain spaces.

CONTEXT



UQ Library includes 14 branches with materials and services for different disciplines being located in each. UQ library has recently carried out a number of refurbishment projects in its branches, including BSL and WHLL. SSHL is due major upgrades and refurbishments in the near future.

SSHL has four levels. Level One, the entry level, houses a large group study space, three medium-sized group spaces, two small group spaces, computer desks and a Newspapers & New Journal space. The service desk and a Multimedia space are located in this level. Level Two includes a Journals and References Collection, an area with group tables, one group study room, a sorting area and study carrels along the perimeter. Levels Three and Four are almost identical; each including books collections, internal study carrels, perimeter study carrels, one group study room and a sorting area.

BSL has four levels. Level One includes computer desks, three booths and printing equipment. It has access to an adjacent café and a palm-tree-lined courtyard providing space for students to relax. Level One was refurbished completely and the other three levels were slightly upgraded. Among the objectives of the refurbishment were: (1) to create spaces for students to work collaboratively in a mix of individual and group study spaces; (2) to provide ambience appealing to 'Generation Y' users using retro furniture and incorporating cutting-edge technologies; and (3) to design spaces

meeting students' informal learning needs and enhancing their social experiences. On Level Two, three eZones, a lounge, two booths with LCD screens and a group space with computers are located. Level Three houses the collaborative learning spaces, two medium-sized group rooms with LCD screens and whiteboards, four small group rooms and printing equipment. Level Four is a dedicated quiet study level including postgraduate and undergraduate study centres.

WHLL has three levels, with Level Two having recently been refurbished to create a number of small booths, computer desks and informal spaces with soft furniture. The service desk and laptop recharge lockers are located in this level. The upper level includes two eZone/training rooms, computer desks, ten small individual study rooms and four medium-sized group study rooms. The top level houses the collection, lockable study desks and study carrels on the east side. On the west side, there are journal collections, two seminar rooms, computer desks, a group study room, a group study area, small individual study rooms and the research lounge.

METHOD

Student Experience of Library Spaces Survey

(1) Questions about all branches of UQ Library

- Library Users' Characteristics & Patterns of Library Use
- Rating the importance of quiet, ambience, access to information, library as a meeting place, and encouragement by seeing other students studying
- Quality and Function of Library Spaces

(2) Questions about one of the three case studies



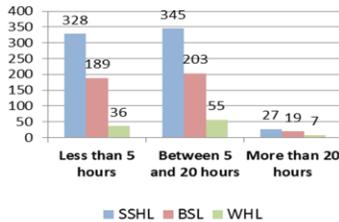
The study was guided by a library space quality framework which includes six criteria for the planning and design of academic library spaces: (1) functionality; (2) being learner-centred; (3) environmental sustainability; (4) being socially inclusive; (5) effective integration of technologies; and (6) fostering inspiration and engagement.

Evaluation used data from an online survey instrument, "Students' Experiences and Perceptions of Library Physical Spaces." The focus of the evaluation was on students' perceptions, experiences, needs and preferences. The survey had two sections: (1) questions about all branches of the UQ Library; and (2) questions on one of the three case study branches. Section One included a part on "Library Users' Characteristics and Patterns of Library Use;" including: age, gender, nature and level of study, the UQ library branches that the respondent frequently uses, the number of hours spent in the library during the semester and exam periods, as well as the formal and informal learning and teamwork activities that the respondent is usually engaged in. In addition, in this section students were asked to rate the importance of certain qualities of library spaces: quiet, ambience, access to information, library as a meeting place, and encouragement by seeing other students studying. A series of Likert-scale questions focused on the "Quality and Function of Library Spaces," asking respondents to rate their satisfaction level with aspects of library design: overall quality of study spaces, welcoming nature of library entries, wayfinding, lighting, acoustics, thermal comfort, and furniture.

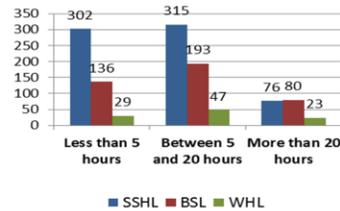
At the end of Section One, students were asked if they use any of the three case studies: SSHL, BSL and WHLL. Depending on their responses, students were redirected to a set of questions on issues around physical spaces in one of these three libraries.

PATTERNS OF LIBRARY USE

Number of hours spent in the library during SEMESTER WEEKS



Number of hours spent in the library during EXAM PERIODS



Frequent Activities in UQ case study libraries

	SSHL	BSL	WHLL
1	Studying alone	Studying alone	Studying alone
2	Completing an individual assignment/Writing a paper	Completing an individual assignment/Writing a paper	Completing an individual assignment/Writing a paper
3	Using my own laptop	Using the library computers	Using my own laptop
4	Finding/borrowing books and journals	Using my own laptop	Using the library computers
5	Using the library computers	Collaborating with colleagues/Group study	Collaborating with colleagues/Group study

1505 students completed the survey, with more than three quarters of the respondents aged between 18-24, and more than three quarters studying for an undergraduate degree. 714 students completed the section on SSSL, and 420 and 100 completed the sections on BSL and WHLL.

In terms of the hours spent in the three libraries, the figures suggest it was just More than 20 hours users who increased use During Exam Periods and there was a slight drop of 8-15% for the users who spend either Less than 5 hours or Between 5 and 20 hours in these libraries.

In terms of patterns of library use, the top six activities that students are most frequently engaged in were:

1. Studying alone
2. Completing an individual assignment or Writing a paper
3. Using my own laptop
4. Using the library computers
5. Collaborating with colleagues/Group study
6. Finding/borrowing books and journals.

This finding highlights the importance of “individual study spaces”, with more than 60% of students coming to the library to study alone either Always or Often.



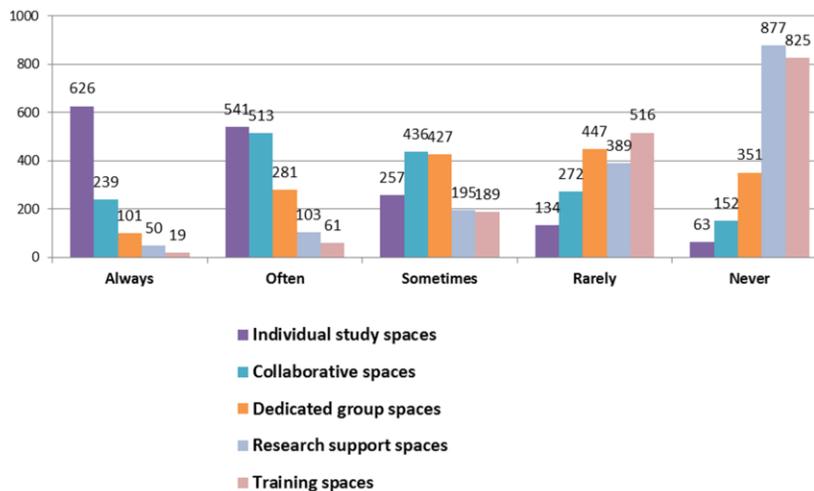
In addition to the activities listed in the first section of survey, students were asked to identify specifics about physical spaces that influenced their preferences for visiting certain library buildings over others.

506 students' comments were recorded in relation to reasons for their visits to SSHL. Location as a focal point of campus and access to books and course-related materials were identified as the top two reasons for students' preferences for SSHL. The third most cited category of reason for student visits to SSHL concerned the design of library spaces i.e. open plan layout, atmosphere and ambience, welcoming nature of spaces, views and a variety of different spaces to choose from according to specific activities, followed by availability of study spaces.

507 student comments were recorded in relation to reasons for their visits to BSL and the preferred or distinguishing features of the library's physical spaces. Similar to SSHL, location was a key factor determining student visits to BSL, followed by aspects of the design of library spaces and 24hr access areas.

85 students' comments were recorded for the question asking students explain their reasons for their visits to WHLL. A distinguishing feature of WHLL, compared with BSL and SSHL, is being quiet, followed by access to books and course-related materials, aspects of the library space design and furniture.

Frequency of Use of Different Spaces



The survey also included a Likert-scale question asking students to specify their frequencies of use of five different study spaces in UQ libraries:

1. “Individual study spaces”;
2. “Collaborative spaces” or open-plan environments within which different settings were created and students can perform multiple activities e.g. working on individual assignments, collaborative groupwork, using library computers/your own laptop and etc.;
3. “Dedicated group spaces” which accommodate the formal group work with access to certain equipment e.g. data projectors, smart boards and plasma screens e.g. project and study rooms;
4. “Research support spaces” which include spaces such as quiet study spaces for postgraduate research students; and
5. “Training spaces” which accommodate formal teaching or training sessions.

As it was expected from the findings in relation to the frequency of library use for certain activities in previous slides, the most frequently used space type in UQ libraries is Individual Study Spaces, followed by Collaborative Spaces.

DESIGN-RELATED QUALITIES

"It is a much more pleasant aesthetic, and the glass and open planning are a much more comfortable place to study. I don't like the feeling of being enclosed in a space and this helps tremendously."



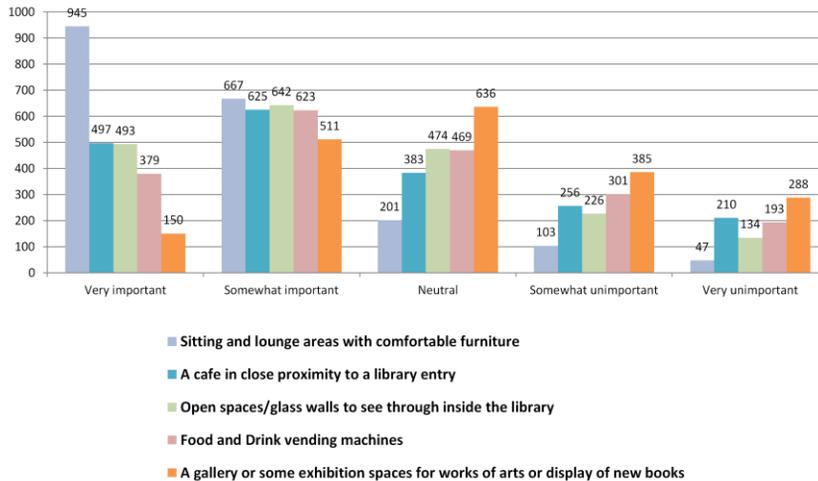
"It has nice modern decor and architecture that makes it welcoming and peaceful. It also has several different zones which is pleasant ... The spaces are varied and I like to change places depending on the type of work I am completing."

Student responses to open-ended questions highlighted positive features of the library design i.e. space layout, interior colour themes and furniture. A detailed discussion on these qualities is presented in an earlier paper presented in IATUL 2014 in Espoo, Finland, on "Measures for Success: Library Resources and Effectiveness under Scrutiny".

Our study qualitative data clearly indicates student awareness of how design-related factors impact their library experiences. For example, at BSL transparency and open-plan layout were identified as positive features of the library design. SSHL was mostly favoured by students because of its prime location, and for its individual study carrels in two upper levels that had views to the outside. In relation to all the three case studies, variety of spaces is clearly favoured by students

Data from the question on overall satisfaction with library spaces suggests relatively positive students' perceptions, with about 75% of survey respondents either Very or Somewhat Satisfied with SSHL, followed by 74% for BSL and 65% for WHLL.

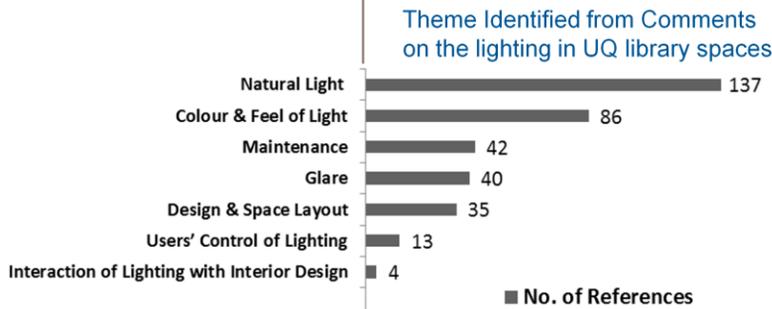
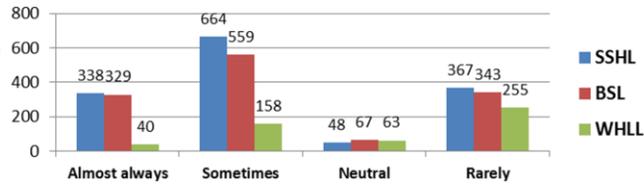
A Welcoming Library Entry



BSL was found to be perceived by students as the most welcoming library, followed by SSHL and WHLL. Students were then asked to comment on five factors in relation to library entry. Lounge areas with comfortable seats was the most important factor to them, followed by a café nearby and openness and transparency. Both BSL and SSHL include these three features to a varying degree.

ACOUSTICS & LIGHTING

Responses to the question of 'how often do you find library spaces noisy and difficult to work in?'



Noise appears to be a major challenge in both BSL and SSHL, with about 25% of respondents finding BSL spaces Almost Always noisy and 43% suggesting noise as an issue Sometimes.

The quantitative data related to lighting in the three case study libraries suggested a generally positive perception, with about 60% of respondents stating that they are Very Satisfied with the quality of lighting in BSL spaces, followed by 53% for SSHL and 47% for WHLL. However, 725 students' comments were recorded on lighting in UQ libraries, and highlighted preference for natural light and awareness of the impacts of the colour and feel of lighting on learning experiences. There were also comments addressing the issue of maintenance, glare, influence of interior design and space layout and users' control.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Library as a place for “Quiet Individual Study”
- Zoning strategies to separate noisy and quiet spaces
- Clear signage in proper locations
- Less formal space for students to read and reflect; a space for creativity and reflection
- Thoughtful and creative design of furniture
- “Choices” of study carrels or individual study desks i.e. furniture, orientation, location and the degree of visual privacy
- Strategies to introduce to students what is on offer re spaces

Our data demonstrates that an important role of academic libraries remains the provision of spaces for individual quiet study, with more than 30% (n=520) of the students completing our survey suggesting that they visit one of the UQ libraries for “Studying Alone” Almost Always, and about 75% (n=1130) stating that it is Very Important that the library is a quiet place. The importance of quiet individual spaces was further highlighted by the qualitative data that included 532 references to the term “quiet.”

Drawing upon the lessons learned from this study, we suggest a number of strategies to enhance existing quiet spaces and create new ones in academic libraries:

- Examine appropriate zoning strategies to separate noisy and quiet spaces/zones i.e. allocating different floors to them
- Use clear signage in proper locations to promote students’ positive attitudes and better library use behaviours
- Consider creating a less formal space for students to read and reflect, a space that can encourage creativity and reflection (See Figure 1, Top and Right, for a good example in SSHL which is favoured by many students as stated in their comments in our survey)
- Ensure thoughtful and creative design of furniture for study carrels addressing factors such as size and the area provided, provision of power-points, features such as shelves and how these work with lighting (e.g. the shelf provided may block the light on the desk)

- Maximise “choices” of study carrels or individual study desks in terms of furniture types, orientation, location and the degree of openness or visual privacy to suit different students’ preferences and activities
- Adopt strategies to introduce to students what is on offer in terms of library spaces

We conclude this with making the case for the need to regularly review the provision of study spaces in academic libraries. An ongoing evaluation of library spaces is an important step in identifying the right balance of study spaces and keeping pace with changes to students’ demographics, pedagogy and technology.

THANK YOU!

www.evaluation-of-academic-library-spaces.com



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