

# Learning ..... with a latte. The Kate Edger Information Commons – providing student-centred learning support.

Hester Mountifield

University of Auckland, New Zealand

[h.mountifield@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:h.mountifield@auckland.ac.nz)

The newly constructed Kate Edger Information Commons, The University of Auckland's leading edge student-centred learning facility, provides a collaborative interdisciplinary environment where over 500 full-productivity workstations, electronic classrooms, and an additional 500+ flexible study and social spaces have been combined with proactive learning support. It presents the infrastructure for the functional integration of the information and technology services, learning support and language skills development offered by the University Library, IT Directorate, Student Learning Centre and English Language Self-Access Centre, consequently creating an enhanced learning environment that reflects the transformation of higher education, information resources and technology. The development of computer and information literacy skills is a key focus area of the Information Commons and opportunities for training are integrated into all aspects of service. The paper will look at the key drivers and desired outcomes that have guided the planning of the Information Commons building and facilities, the strategic fit of stakeholders resulting in the various collaborative arrangements and an integrated service model that provides a one-stop-shop for student enquiries.

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, the term "student-centred university" has gained currency in a significant number of universities throughout the world. The term implies that universities should be designed to enhance student learning and student life. The Student Amenities and Information Commons complex at The University of Auckland was designed to enhance the learning environment of the University as well as to create an attractive and convenient place for students to socialise and relax. The Kate Edger Information Commons presents a student-centred infrastructure for information services and learning support that facilitates the delivery of customised, comprehensive and convenient services reflecting the transformation of higher education and trends in IT and associated electronic information resources. It includes facilities and spaces accommodating individual and group activity, integrates new technologies with services, and establishes dynamic and innovative partnerships between information and learning support providers on campus. The University of Auckland, established in 1883, is New Zealand's largest university. The University consists of four campuses namely the City Campus, Medical & Health Sciences Campus, North Shore Campus and the Tamaki Campus. The City Campus of the University of Auckland, spanning an area of 16 hectares, is located in the Auckland CBD. In 2002, the City Campus served a student population of 20,524 EFTS, studying across seven Faculties and Schools – Architecture, Property Planning & Fine Arts, Arts, Business & Economics, Engineering, Law, Medical & Health Sciences and Science. In common with other higher education providers, University of Auckland students need to operate in an increasingly complex electronic environment as is evident in the growing amount of teaching, research, support and administrative information and services available on the web.

## 2 Key Drivers

The University of Auckland was faced with an urgent need to increase the amount of study space available in the central area of the City Campus as the libraries were overcrowded and the ratio of study space to students was out of alignment with that in similar institutions. Equally important was providing an acceptable standard of amenities and service to students. The existing

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Student Union facilities were developed in the 1960s and 1970s when the University's student roll was less than half its current size. The impact of student-centred teaching methods such as problem-based learning, evidence-based learning, reflective study and group work has resulted in a need for flexible spaces. The Information Commons includes group work areas, private study spaces, open consultation and adaptable service points that allow a greater tolerance of noise and activity. The increasing rate of computer use for teaching, study, research and communication leads to significant changes in student characteristics, needs and expectations. The demand for flexible learning options has grown rapidly and students expect widespread access to computers that provide an integrated suite of tools and resources.

The University of Auckland Library has a centralised corporate function (Administration, Biblio Centre, Document Delivery, Learning Services and Digital Services) but decentralised client service with eleven subject libraries and three Information Commons facilities. The strategic realignment of Library services and resources over the period 2000 - 2001 has resulted in the target client base for the General Library (1 million volumes, 1000 study seats) to be senior students and staff from the Faculties of Arts, Science and Business & Economics. This was achieved by amalgamating the collections and services of the Science, Biological Sciences and Geography Libraries within the General Library housing the Arts and Business collections. The primary target base of the Kate Edger Information Commons is undergraduate students from the same faculties, although the facility will be open to all students.

University documents and plans, published prior to the development of the Information Commons, refer to an integrated approach to IT and information literacy development. The Academic Audit of 2000 recommended "that the University of Auckland treats as a matter of urgency the means of developing and coordinating a coherent approach to training programmes in computer and information literacy skills across the University of Auckland."<sup>(1)</sup> The University of Auckland's Academic Plan states that the University is committed to:

- Developing an information literacy policy and support systems that enable students to locate, evaluate and use information effectively
- Identifying a level of computer skill that all students must acquire and the support systems needed to achieve these levels.

The graduate attributes defined in the same document point out that graduates should:

- Be able to recognize when information is needed and have the capacity to locate, evaluate and use this information effectively
- Have appropriate computer literacy skills
- Have a lifelong love and enjoyment of ideas, discovery and learning. <sup>(2)</sup>

Learning support services for students were located in different buildings on campus. The Student Learning Centre, providing academic learning and performance skills development and some computer skills training, had no dedicated computer training room and inadequate teaching facilities and staff offices. ELSAC, the English Language Self-Access Centre, was located far from the centre of the City Campus.

An Information Commons concept was developed as part of the University Library's vision for enhanced services to the University community and a discussion document was presented to University Management. The University saw that the proposed concept was complementary to the strategy to improve student facilities on the City Campus and the Student Commons and Information Commons Project was started early in 2001.

### **3 Opportunities, Agreed Strategy and Desired Outcomes**

A project team consisting of key stakeholders within the University developed a design brief based on an agreed strategy and

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vision for the Information Commons. It was envisaged that the Information Commons would be a modern student-centred facility that provided a variety of easily identified and conveniently located spaces, computer workstations and access to information resources, technologies and expert staff that supported different scholarly needs in one physical location. The proposed size of the facility created the opportunity to co-locate related learning support services such as:

- The University Library's high demand collection for Arts, Science and Business & Economics students. The collection consists of over 12,000 prescribed and recommended texts and articles.
- The University Library's Learning Services team which provides information skills teaching.
- The Student Learning Centre which provides academic and learning skills development and computer skills teaching.
- The IT Directorate's Electronic Campus Help Desk which supports student computing and manages student Internet and printing accounts.
- The English Language Self-Access Centre which assists and supports all students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Strategic partnerships and collaboration between student learning support providers were expected to result in an enhanced and attractive learning environment. The development of computer and information literacy skills in the University community, especially undergraduate students, will be a key focus area of the Information Commons. The University Library's Learning Services department will seek collaboration with faculty, the Student Learning Centre and other University units to develop the information literacy of students. It will be a welcoming, attractive and safe place to study and socialise.

The stated vision for the Kate Edger Information Commons is to provide a highly visible, modern and unique facility which will inspire students to acquire new skills so that they can participate more actively in the learning process. This will be facilitated by access to advanced, integrated information resources, systems and services. Four desired outcomes have guided the planning of the building, facilities and service provision. These outcomes were developed after comprehensive research of other Information Commons facilities. The research included studying journal articles, web sites and email communication with Information Commons planners and managers. The outcomes are based on a planning document from The University of Calgary Library. (3)

Desired Outcome One – Skills Development:

Assist students to acquire skills to locate, retrieve, evaluate and use information effectively through:

- Courses in computer, information and learning skills presented in flexible teaching spaces that include state of the art equipment.
- Individualised instruction provided in consultation spaces throughout the building and during user transactions.
- Several layers of instruction, catering for different needs and preferences, in a wide-ranging collection of guides and self-paced tutorials in both print and electronic format.

Desired Outcome Two – Effective Information Access:

Students are able to access information to facilitate learning through:

- Searching and use of all databases to which the University Library has established access.
- Searching for and use of information available on the Internet and the University's web site.
- Availability of the University Library's high demand print and audiovisual collection.
- Expert staff providing support.

Desired Outcome Three – Access to Quality Facilities:

IT and a mixture of spaces in the Information Commons facilitate student learning through access to:

- Flexible computer workstation and study areas designed for both group and individual work.
  - Group study spaces which are fully wired and equipped.
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- Spaces for laptop users and laptops for loan.
- Printing, downloading, file transfer and storage, scanning, and photocopying capabilities.
- Audiovisual equipment in a well-designed space.
- Specialist technologies and space adequate to the needs of students with disabilities.

Desired Outcome Four – Improved Support:

Expert support structures are in place to facilitate learning through:

- Providing expert support to facilitate learning through an integrated service delivered by multi-skilled staff.
- Assistance in the location, retrieval, evaluation and use of information.
- Assistance in the capture, manipulation, storage, articulation and transfer of information.
- Providing specialist support to students in English language skills development
- Collaboration between other University IT service points and facilities to identify resources and expertise which will complement the activities of the Information Commons.
- Clear and effective system of referral and escalation of queries and problems.

#### **4 The Kate Edger Information Commons Building and Facilities**

The Kate Edger Information Commons building is one part of a major building development at the University of Auckland. Construction commenced late October 2001 and the buildings were occupied during April/May 2003. The Student Commons building accommodates core student service functions such as retail, Health & Counselling, AUSA offices, Student Administration Accommodation Centre, Postgraduate Lounge, International Student Centre and Disabilities Services. Retail services such as a bank, pharmacy, enlarged bookshop, hairdresser, travel agency, copy centre, cafés and an ethnic food court will meet the needs of a diverse and multicultural student population. The buildings fit within the limits of an urban campus development, complement the existing look and feel of the campus and the architecture mirrors the modern requirements for transparency. The University's vision is that the development will create a dynamic and vibrant heart within the campus and serve as a gateway to the rest of the City Campus. The buildings are linked by a glass atrium and there are walkways between the two buildings and clear points of entry into the different areas on all levels. The total development is 9,045 square metres with the Kate Edger Information Commons taking up 4,726 square metres. A courtyard of 600 square metres provides outdoor seating and links to an indoor/outdoor café on Level 0 of the Information Commons. Architecture Warren and Mahoney were the principal architects for the project. The design architect is Thom Craig, previously a director of Architecture Warren and Mahoney, now from MAP. (4)

The Information Commons building was named after Kate Edger, the first female graduate of the University of New Zealand and the British Empire, who graduated with a BA in 1877 and a MA in 1882. The building is a highly glazed five-storey structure on the corner of Alfred and Symonds Streets. A stainless steel mesh screen along the Symonds Street façade provides a thermal barrier and privacy from the road. The student areas are large spaces facing the street with beautiful views towards the Waitemata Harbour and the Domain. The staff and training areas are on the other side facing the Student Commons. The facility, allowing for both group and individual study and relaxation, provides in different configurations over 1000 seats, including 500+ full-productivity computers. Level 0, the biggest floor with a café at the one end, consists of discussion rooms, group study tables and computers. The University Library's High Demand print and audiovisual collection for Arts, Science and Business & Economics is located on Level 1, alongside the English Language Self-Access Centre (ELSAC). The IC Help Desk features prominently on Level 2 with a computer training room, Students with Disabilities project room, 150 computers and casual seating. The Student Learning Centre is based on Level 3, together with a small computer training room, a seminar room that can be divided, 150 computers and casual seating. Level 4, during phase one, will be a technology-free area that is ideal for individual study. Another two computer training rooms, a divisible seminar room, a meeting room and the University Library's Learning Services department are also located on Level 4. All levels are equipped with photocopiers and express workstations and on Levels 0, 2

and 3 students have access to printers and scanners.

The Information Technology infrastructure in the Kate Edger Information Commons is designed to provide maximum flexibility to adapt to changing teaching and learning technology requirements. The building is fully wired to each study space, allowing the provision of desktop computers as well as the use of student-owned laptops. Although the design is based on conventional wired networking architectures, provision has been made for future developments in the area of wireless technology by the installation of several base stations on all levels.

Student electronic services at the University of Auckland are managed through the NetAccount authentication and authorisation system. Students have access to the Internet from within the University, University resources from outside the University, printing on campus and student email through NetAccount. All enrolled students have a login or NetID and password that they use to log on and identify themselves. User charges for Internet and printing are levied by direct debit to their NetAccount. All students receive an annual allocation for Internet access and some departments allocate print credits to their students for printing course-related work and additional credits for Internet access. Students can deposit funds in their NetAccounts at the Electronic Campus HelpDesk and other points of sale on the different campuses.

The full-productivity computers in the student areas and computer training rooms are Dell Optiplex SX260 Ultra Small Form Factor with Intel Pentium 4 operating in a Windows XP environment. Flat panel high-resolution monitors are used to reduce heat and noise and maximize desktop space. Central file storage is provided to allow students to retrieve and work with their files on any computer in the Information Commons and in departmental computer labs. The NetAccount printing environment allows for cost-recovery through a pay-for-print system. NetLogin software has been installed on all the computers in the Information Commons and students must log on to use a computer.

The formal teaching spaces such as the computer training rooms and seminar rooms are well positioned throughout the building to prevent congestion. They have clear access points, comfortable seating, clean sight lines and good lighting and sound. Four of three computer training rooms have a seating capacity for 20 students each and the smaller room for 12 students. The seminar rooms are fitted with a divider for greater flexibility and can seat 45 and 60 students at chairs with tabloid arms respectively. All the rooms are equipped with state-of-the-art audiovisual and presentation technology. Each room has a smaller version of the e-lectern used in many of the big lecture theatres on campus. The s-lectern was designed for smaller teaching spaces and can consist of up to 4 audiovisual and presentation units with easy access to a control panel. All the s-lecterns are fitted with a data projector, networked computer with an internal DVD CD Writer, sound and either a document camera or overhead projector.

The Kate Edger Information Commons is different from most other Information Commons facilities in that it is a separate building and not part of an existing library building. It is the largest of its kind in New Zealand and compares favourably with similar international facilities in terms of size and resources.

## **5 New Partnerships, Innovation and New Service Models**

In building collaboration with other organisational units, you should accentuate what you have in common, rather than what divides you. The University Library, IT Directorate (ITSS), Student Learning Centre and the English Language Self-Access Centre are working together to provide a proactive integrated learning support environment for students. The environment and partnerships are still evolving and will undoubtedly continue to improve and adapt to remain relevant in an ever-changing higher education environment.

A small team consisting of key staff from the University Library's Learning Services department and ITSS started scoping the

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support service in April 2002. Information on current support services in the Libraries, Student Computer Labs and other Information and Resources Centres on campus was gathered and analysed. Formal student surveys done by the University Library, International Office, Graduate Centre and Student Life Commission also provided useful information. Recurring negative feedback on specific areas of service and support was easy to extract from all these.

The planning process consisted of several steps, with the Information Commons vision, desired outcomes and customer needs as the guiding elements. Existing roles were examined, identifying each team's strengths and weaknesses. A new service model, based on all information gathered, was developed in draft format and submitted to key stakeholders and managers for comment. The draft proposal outlined the components of the service, proposed management structure, new procedures, standards, training requirements and the budget. The benefits that the new service model will bring to the client group were highlighted. Questions were answered, feedback was considered and integrated into the draft model.

Many Information Commons facilities in North America have separate reference and computing services desks staffed by experts in specific areas. Staff at the Leavey Library of the University of Southern California found that students were frustrated by the need to distinguish their questions between computer-based or research-based and that the boundary between computer and research assistance had become vague. Because of these factors and a recommendation from the Leavey Library faculty advisory board, an integrated service was developed with appropriate staff training as an important component of the service. (5)

The Kate Edger Information Commons student support service is a new model that is based on the merger of existing services and newly developed positions. The Electronic Campus HelpDesk service, the customer service arm of the ITSS NetAccount department, merged with the University Library's Learning Services to form the IC Help Service. The service operates in a cross-functional multi-skilled team environment and consists of two components. The highly visible IC Help area is the help desk providing walk-in support to students, NetAccount sales and open consultation space which could be used by staff members from the different student support departments. For example, Subject Librarians could use the consultation spaces to assist students when specific assignments are due, representatives from Student Administration could assist with enrolment during core times. The other component of the service, providing first tier roaming support, is the IC Consultants. The service is managed by the Help Desk Manager and After Hours Help Desk Supervisors.

The main purpose of the Information Commons Consultants is to serve as primary student support staff in the Information Commons. They will provide a roving consultation service by assisting students using the public workstations in the Information Commons, work shifts on the IC Help desk, and assist with special projects on a point of need basis. Information Commons Consultants are expected to have a general knowledge of electronic resources, software and databases in the Information Commons, on the Internet, and on the campus network. They are required to know how to use and support the major electronic resources available in the Information Commons, including WWW resources, on-line databases, and instructional software. They will be well trained in MS Office type software, and be able to provide qualified assistance to users in creating documents, spreadsheets, and other production-related issues. They should provide general PC skills support (e.g. accessing files from drives), scanning, assisting patrons in the use of the NetAccount authentication system and EzProxy, basic Cecil and nDeva usage, as well as supporting the print, scanning and photocopying system. Cecil is the University of Auckland's learning management system and nDeva is the student administration and online enrolment system. Difficulties beyond the scope of the Help Desk Manager, After Hours Supervisors and Information Commons Consultants are referred to the appropriate department using an agreed method. Appropriate cross training to develop skills in many areas is crucial to the delivery of the service. The experts in the associated areas of service offer the training. Ongoing training and refreshers will be provided at regular intervals.

The IC Help service is managed as a joint venture between the University Library and ITSS. The University Library will take

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responsibility for the day-to-day management of the walk-in and roving support in the Information Commons. ITSS will take responsibility for NetAccount support and remote student assistance directed to the ITSS Service Desk. An Information Commons IT Advisory Board was established to advise on the direction and management of the student support and IT services of the facility and to assist in the resolution of any question, dispute, or difference. The University Library and ITSS have developed a formal partnership agreement. The agreement, which will be reviewed annually, includes areas of responsibility, agreed methods of communication, dispute resolution.

Benefits of working collaboratively include:

- Integrated seamless support service to students.
- Interworking across sectors or domains resulting in a cross-functional multi-skilled team environment.
- Sharing of resources.
- Developing and/or adapting standards.
- Innovation

It will be a challenge to develop a successful, fully integrated service. The expertise, support and cooperation of many stakeholders on campus are very important. More partnerships need to be formed to ensure that high service levels are maintained, appropriate training is provided and changes and developments in services and products are communicated. Procedures for the referral of problems should be developed in consultation with partners and available online and other tools should be used to report and track referred problems.

## 6 Conclusion

Beagle defines the information commons as “a new type of physical facility specifically designed to organize workspace and service delivery around the integrated digital environment”. (6) Integral to the success of the Kate Edger Information Commons is an integrated help desk and support service that is pro-active, clear and intuitive to the students. Students want immediate help to meet their information, learning and research needs, not an inflexible support structure that expects them to categorise their queries and that might send them from Helpdesk to Helpdesk.

It is too soon to say if the integrated service model implemented in the Kate Edger Information Commons is successful and if it meets the needs and expectations of the students. The ongoing development of the service will be based on purpose and role, not structure, with end user feedback and needs guiding the service levels. However, it is clear that the student-centred resources, facilities and attractive spaces in the Kate Edger Information Commons have greatly improved student life at the University of Auckland.

## References

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