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Paul Hamlyn Library: an integral part of UWL campus

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Paul Hamlyn Library: an integral part of UWL campus



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Tim Wales reflects on the lessons learned more than a year after the opening of the Paul Hamlyn Library at the University of West London (UWL).

THE Paul Hamlyn Library at the University of West London opened in September 2015. It is spread over four floors of the Peter John Building at UWL's main St Mary's Road Campus. Open 24/7 during term time, it offers 750 study spaces, 155 open access computers and 2km of static/automated compact shelving for 85,000 stock items with three training labs and various meeting facilities. Having opened on time in September 2015, summer vacation 2016 provided the first opportunity to revisit the main professional concerns arising during the original planning meetings to determine whether or not further enhancements and adjustments might be needed for the 16/17 academic session.

● **Open stock security** – one of the more unusual design features of our new facility is that there are no gate lines or book alarms in the ground entrance area to the library. This was intended to help make the library seem a natural and integral part of the campus and adjoining Heart atrium area, as well as being a pragmatic response to the challenges of underfloor heating and multiple entry points! Instead, the library's new RFID stock security sensors were directly linked to the turnstiles at the two main campus receptions so that unissued items could not be taken out to the street. The concern was that this would lead to high-demand stock items 'wandering around' the main campus before being abandoned in teaching spaces far from their shelving in the library space. In practice, this has not happened, either because students are naturally conditioned to issue items out on the self-service kiosks as they leave the library or that they have realised that there is a 'hassle-factor' in having to walk all the way back to the library when they find they cannot proceed through the turnstiles without checking out items. Having said that, we have not yet cracked how to offer a similar set-up for our self-service coin operated bag lockers within our RFID alarm zone.

● **Study and noise zoning** – like most modern university libraries, the Paul Hamlyn Library's three study floors were designed to support particular types of study reinforced by furniture and design specifications. Our design consultants, Nomad RDC, were able to help us impose a group / noisy to individual / quiet study progression as readers progressed upwards from the first to the third floor. We also added a red / amber / green traffic light sticker system to indicate what kinds of study behaviours were expected in different areas in the hope that it could be self-managed by students. In reality, during our busiest afternoon periods, we found that noise emanating up a large lightwell from the group study floor to upper floors 'muddied the waters' in some areas. It gave the minority of students who wanted to talk wherever they studied an excuse when challenged or irritated those students who wanted a truly quiet space. In addition, we realised that effective use of assistive technology for hearing-impaired students needed enclosed spaces on some floors.

● **Enquiry support** – the most challenging part of the original design was the library reception area with entry points at either side of a square space. Once we knew from Nomad RDC customer research that our students still valued a fixed point helpdesk, we were able to collectively come up with an innovate curved helpdesk formed out of the word 'Library' reaching out into the atrium space that could serve as a desk during staffed hours and as a design feature (or bar!) out of hours, with equipment stowed away. Amazingly, even this feature with our new book sorter returns units in the background did not stop some students asking where the library was and so we realised we would need to add additional way finding signage reinforced with roaming enquiry support.

An evolving space

Thankfully, we were able to make a successful bid for capital funds to make some



Academic libraries like UWL's will always need to evolve every year.



The front façade of the Paul Hamlyn Library overlooking the new UWL Heart space.



Different types of study furniture interspersed between Bruynzeel book shelving.



Info points on every floor for roaming support and OPAC access.



Ground floor entrance area with displays and self-service kiosks.

changes and enhancements over the summer vacation to address some of the matters highlighted above, drawing on actual student feedback gained from comments and course committees.

● **Noise baffling** – as the main complaint we had received was around noise from the light-well negatively impacting on study zones, we asked for a glass canopy to be designed and installed across the bottom of the light well to act as a baffle. This had to be custom designed taking into account light, ventilation, load-bearing and cleaning concerns.

● **Room conversions** – although we had thought back in 2015 that the first rooms to be repurposed might be for additional staff accommodation, in reality two existing rooms were converted for other purposes. A small meeting room was created out of part of our originally L-shaped seminar room to better support private use of assistive technology by disabled users. A too-large and under-used silent study room on our already silent study floor was converted into our first archive storage and reading room to support our strategic aspirations in that area, thanks to a recent successful Heritage Lottery Fund bid relating to our

Heathrow Archive.

● **Additional facilities** – given the popularity of the first floor for group study, we took the opportunity to make better use of existing circulation space in providing two additional group study pods with integrated seating, tables and power. We are also still intending to satisfy student requests for water fountains on two floors.

● **Additional support** – we arranged for additional above door and pillar signage to be installed to help student orientation and way-finding within the library envelope. Our roaming support has evolved too with the addition of walkie-talkies, iPads, fixed phone points and online chat facilities (extended to 24/7 availability in line with our building opening hours from October 2016, thanks to a new Sconul/OCLC scheme).

The final verdict

The National Student Survey (NSS) 2016 results in August were always going to provide the first official verdict on the success or otherwise of the Paul Hamlyn Library due to the sheer number of respondents and the fact that the third year cohort completing the survey were the first to benefit from

the new facility. Although we had had some positive indications from our first combined Library & IT Student Survey undertaken over the Christmas 2015 period that the new facilities were being well received, the number of respondents was low. Nor did we know if students affiliated to the three Schools at our Brentford campus would penalise us heavily for the closure of the small site library there, even with a brand new facility a short courtesy bus-ride away.

Nonetheless, we were amazed to learn that our library satisfaction score had increased by 13 per cent from 74 per cent in 2015 to 87 per cent (the sector average) in 2016 – the second highest year-on-year increase after Lancaster University.

We cannot rest on our laurels. As the student body and institution continues to grow and demands increase, further changes are inevitable and the flexibility of the space tested. For example, as a career-focused university, demand for private, small group study or presentation spaces will grow, as will the demand for different types of academic support provision to be in one place for ease of access.

Academic libraries like UWL's will always need to evolve every year. [1]