

# 5.10 The Thurgoona Learning Commons

## What it is?

The Thurgoona Learning Commons (TLC) is a learner-centred space that facilitates learning outside the classroom setting. It is located in Albury-Wodonga on the Thurgoona Campus of Charles Sturt University (CSU).

The TLC building is designed to accommodate the Library and its services and collections; Information Technology help services; Learning Skills Advisors; and Indigenous Student Services. It has a café and a 24-hour access space. Adaptive technology to assist students with disabilities is available in the 24-hour space.

social, interactive and collaborative spaces are located, to the rear, facilitating noise control and a stronger sense of privacy in the quiet, individual learning spaces. The Library collection is arranged to buffer noise and create different sorts of learning spaces. Group rooms provide spaces for discussion and rehearsal of presentations.

Furniture is a mixture of fixed and movable tables and chairs, with couches and easy chairs for less formal interactions. Moveable furniture can be reconfigured to accommodate different sized groups as required. Electricity and data connections are provided in all fixed furniture and via cabling pods for the flexible areas. Wireless connectivity is available throughout the building and in the quadrangle outside. The TLC

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### ADMINISTRATION

### LEARNING

How do I enrol?  
How do I pay my student residence fees?  
How do I get a new transcript?

How do I print?  
How do I contact my lecturer?

How do I research my essay topic?  
How do I write an essay?  
How do I cite my references?

Figure 1: Service Continuum

The Thurgoona Campus has an international reputation for its environmentally sensitive design and its focus on sustainable living, energy and water conservation and habitat preservation. Buildings on the campus are sited and designed to maximize natural ventilation and lighting, using sun shading and landscaping to reduce energy use. Water is harvested and recycled. Woollen carpets, natural linoleum, recycled and plantation timbers and low volatile paints provide healthy indoor air. The design of the TLC follows these principles.

Specially designed areas are available for researchers and for parents who need to bring very young children onto campus while they study. There are three teaching areas fully equipped with PCs and designed to accommodate classes of up to 16 students. Two of these teaching spaces are transitional and expected to disappear within two years as other facilities develop on the Campus. All three areas are open to casual use when they are not used for classes.

The design of the physical spaces and furnishings designate the use of the area: from noisy, social learning spaces through group study areas to individual quiet spaces. The ceiling height steps down from the front of the building where the

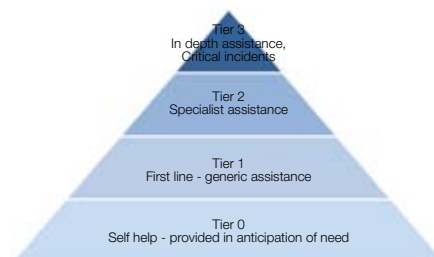


Figure 2: Tiered Service Model

is designed to accommodate learner provided technologies, but desktop PCs and Macs are available and students can borrow laptops for use in the building and its environs.

## Why it is?

Student support services at CSU are visualised as spanning a continuum from administrative support to learning support (Figure 1).

The end goal is a Single Point of Contact where students can have all their enquiries resolved without any need to understand the organisational structure of the University and without any need to be physically present at any particular point. Support services are available face-to-face or virtually, synchronous or asynchronous. Support services are tiered by level of complexity (Figure 2).

The objective is to have as many queries as possible answered at Tier 0 so that queries are answered at the point of need at the time of need. Because 75 percent of CSU's 34,000 students are enrolled in off-campus modes, the virtual component of service alignment and delivery is extremely important.

The TLC operates at the learning skills end of the service continuum. It provides a physical manifestation of the Single Point of Contact. The services relating to learning skills are provided by four separate organisational units at CSU including Library Services, IT, Learning Skills Advisors, and Indigenous Services. The staff from each of these units is co-located in the TLC building. Service alignment across organisational units and tiers of service is an essential ingredient of the concept. Tier 1 services are provided from a single service point, backed by a common knowledge management system. Tier 2 and Tier 3 services are handled by specialist staff in physical spaces that provide greater privacy and confidentiality.

The TLC is not just a service delivery point: it is also an integral part of the Learning & Teaching Precinct on the Thurgoona Campus. Pedagogies were mapped to spaces within the Learning & Teaching Precinct, including outdoor spaces (Figure 3).

The TLC caters for self-directed, non-facilitated, collaborative learning; providing facilities for individuals and small groups, and interactive videoconferencing for collaboration at a distance.

The virtual aspect of the learning spaces provided in the TLC is just as important as the physical spaces, and for the same reasons as the virtual aspects of service delivery are important: the high proportion of off-campus modes of study.

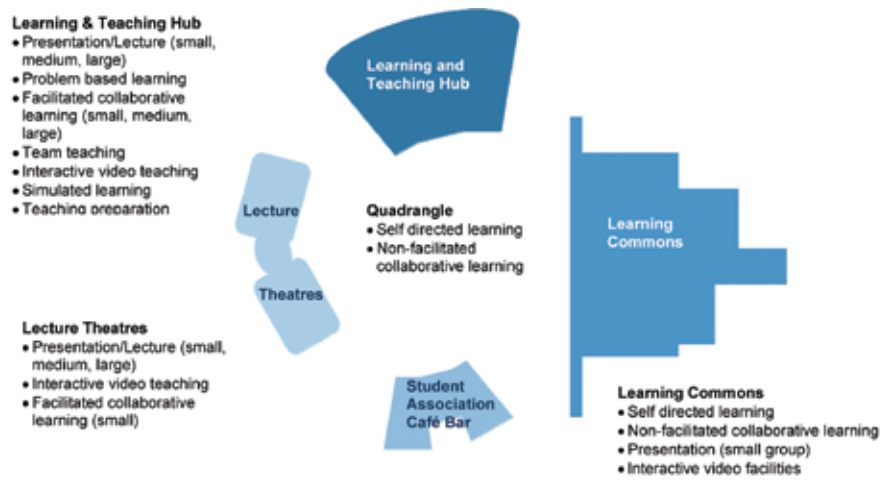


Figure 3: Pedagogy Space Map - Learning & Teaching Precinct

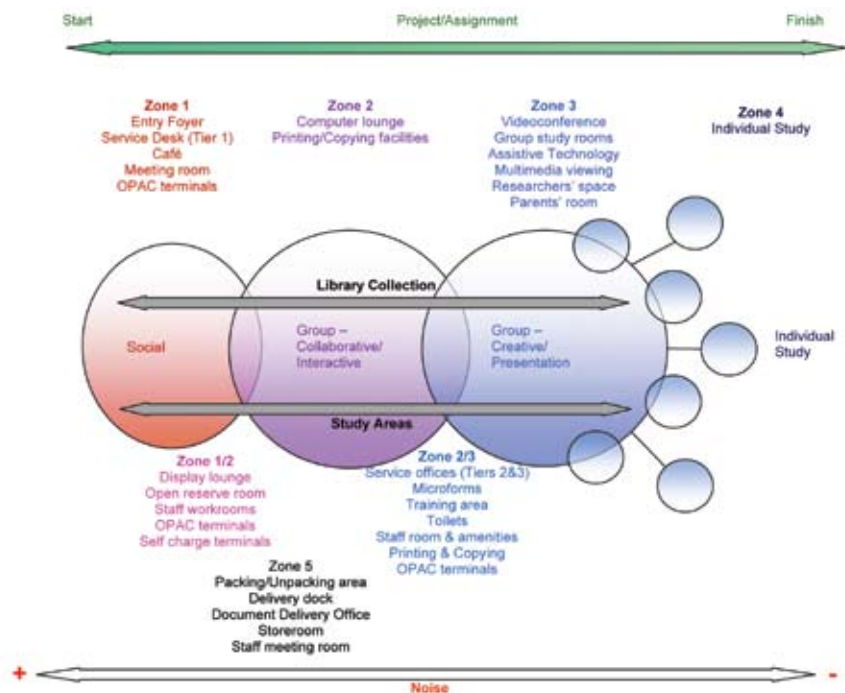


Figure 4: Learning Strategies Mapped to Physical Spaces

The physical learning spaces of the TLC are complemented by the virtual learning and collaboration spaces and tools provided through CSU Interact - the University's SAKAI-based online collaboration and learning environment.

In designing the physical layout of the building, we started by mapping the learning strategies that would occur within the TLC to the activities associated with those strategies, and then placing the activities into four zones (Figure 4):

- Social zone;
- Group collaborative/interactive zone;
- Group creative/presentation zone; and
- Individual study zone.

As learners move from the social zone to the individual study zone, they also move from noisy spaces to quiet spaces.

Functions were then mapped to the zones (Figure 5). Service points and specialist usage spaces (such as group discussion/presentation rooms, microform and multimedia viewing areas) are located in the relevant zone. Some functions overlap zones.

In this schematic map:

- The green spaces are 24-hour spaces.
- The yellow spaces show where service provision is located and how different services relate to the zones. For example, Open Reserve and the Enquiry point are closer to the social interactive zones than Learning Skills and Indigenous support that are more private.
- Moving from yellow to red indicates the gradation from more public to more private functions.
- The blue areas contain quieter functional spaces, using the collection to buffer sound and to define study areas.
- The size of each lozenge indicates the relative size of the space required for the function.

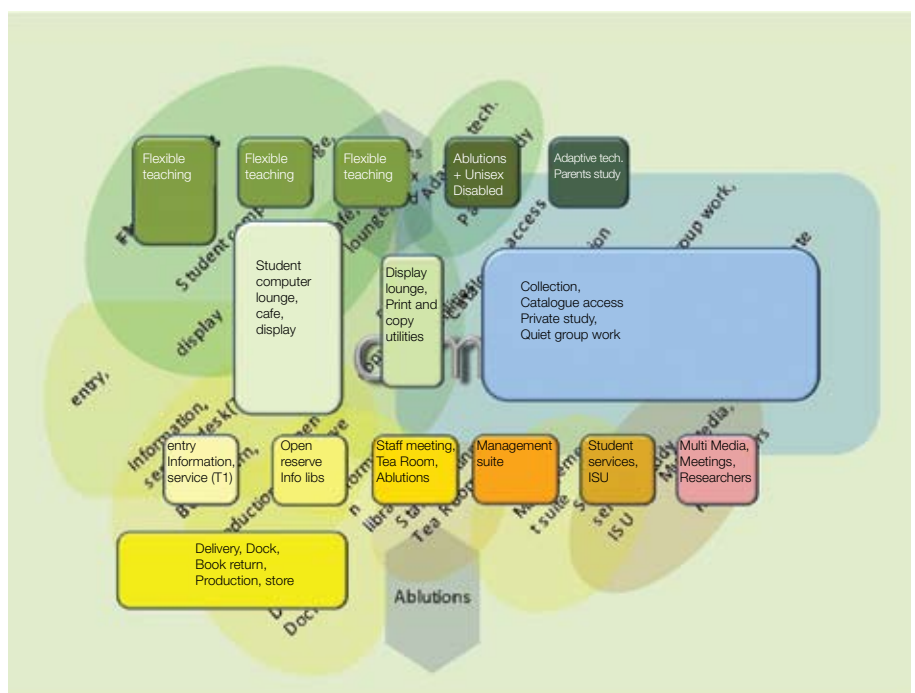


Figure 5: Functions Mapped to Zones of Learning

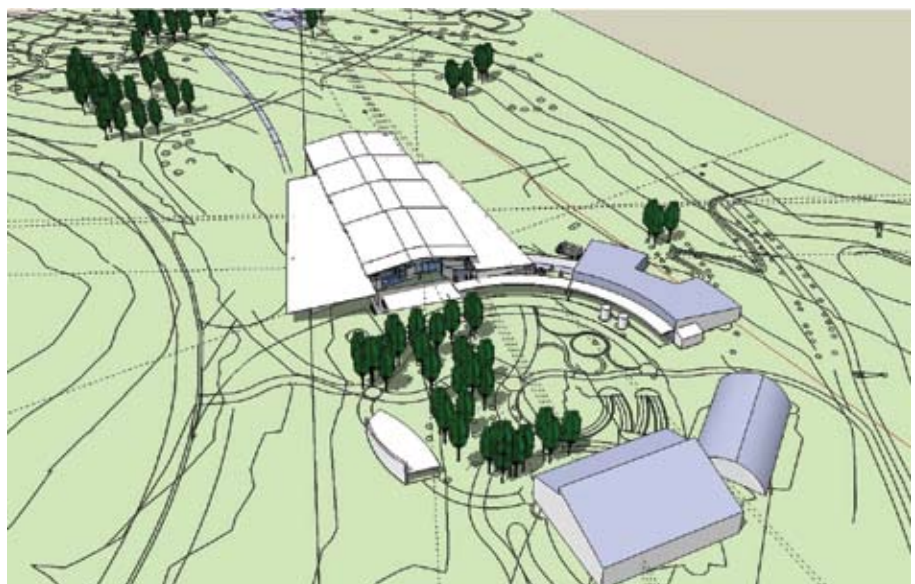


Figure 6: Thurgoona Learning & Teaching Precinct

The architects used this information in designing the building.

The design aligns with the environmental sustainability principles that underlie all development on the campus. The building is oriented so that the entry is north facing. Glazing along the walls and in the stepped roofline allows maximum natural light. The collection is located in the centre and towards the back of the building to shield it from sunlight and to provide the best temperature and humidity control for preservation. People are located at the front and sides where there is maximum natural light and views to the outside.

The social zone is at the front of the building, and activities move through Zones 2 and 3 to Zone 4 - individual study - at the back. The roof-line steps down from front to back, and the glazing reduces, so that the individual study zone is lower and cosier as well as quieter.

The Learning & Teaching precinct is designed in the belief that learning is something that occurs everywhere. The whole precinct is a learning space with different sorts of nodes, one of which is the TLC (Figure 6).

Network access and social learning spaces indoors and out are part of the concept. Landscaping of the quadrangle takes account not only of environmental considerations, but also the provision of social learning spaces. Wireless access covers the entire precinct.

### What will happen here?

The TLC is a learning space outside the classroom that sustains the learning experience from the class session into other learning contexts. It provides an integrated environment with spaces and technologies that support learning theory principles. It is a student-centered learning space that provides seamless access to the University's information resources; supports all flexible learning methodologies that students may require now and in the future; and facilitates socialisation as part of the learning experience. It facilitates self-directed, non-facilitated,

collaborative learning by individuals and groups. The locus of control is in the hands of the learner.

The TLC is also a Single Point of Contact that provides seamless access to support services at the learning skills end of the support continuum.

### How will the space be used?

The TLC is not yet occupied; however the planning and design are based on Stage 1 of the Learning Commons on the Bathurst Campus. The Bathurst Learning Commons is grafted onto an existing building and provides the 24-hour functionality and spaces that form part of the TLC. Observation and assessment of activities at Bathurst informed the development of the TLC.

Students use the space across the whole spread of hours, 24/7. CSU has a high proportion of residential on-campus students and all rooms in the residences have access to the University's network. However students prefer to use the Learning Commons because of the social interaction possible in the space. They will queue up to use equipment in the Commons area, and sit on the floor if nothing else is available, rather than move to the more traditional library space. This applies even if they are working alone rather than as part of a group.

When the Library proper is closed, access is via the CSU ID card. Security is enhanced by CCTV cameras that scan the interior and exterior spaces and display on large plasma screens inside the Commons. Students can see what is happening from wherever they sit. This is popular at night – students like to be able to see what is going on immediately outside the Commons before they exit.

The Commons Café is a popular feature and well used. Academic staff come to the Commons for coffee, often holding meetings with their colleagues in the Commons space. This has facilitated informal interaction between academic staff and students, which was an unexpected outcome. Academics like the space as much as the students.

The adaptive technology area is located in the 24-hour space. It is a glassed enclosure that offers privacy but allows connection to the social activities in the Commons. Use of these facilities has increased.

The Learning Commons has changed the social dynamics of the Campus: activities now centre on the spaces around the Commons. The Commons is the place to be: to meet up with friends, to work together in formal and informal groups, or to work alone in a social space.

### How will technology be used?

Based on the Bathurst Learning Commons experience, technology is used as a tool in the learning process – students take it for granted that what they need will be available to them.

The space is designed to be highly flexible, catering for student-provided technologies. At present this means laptop computers and a mix of wireless and wired connection and lots of power points, but iPhones in particular are introducing new expectations.

Groups of between two and four students cluster around workstations and larger groups around laptops. Furniture is reconfigured to suit the needs of the students at the time. It is notable that the ergonomic chairs provided at fixed workstations are almost always substituted for casual chairs. Laptops are often used by students sitting or lying on the floor.

### How will the facility be evaluated?

Evaluation of the TLC will follow the techniques used to evaluate the Bathurst Learning Commons. The methods used included formal and informal feedback from:

- Library specific client satisfaction surveys
- Course evaluation questionnaires and the First and Final Year evaluation projects at University level
- Library online forums and the Library Blog
- Library suggestion boards, physical and virtual
- Observation of actual use
- Patterns of use from login and door entry statistics

At Bathurst, students like the noise and vibrancy of the space and its physical appearance, they feel comfortable there. Access to the café and the refreshments via vending machines outside café hours is highly valued.

Group study rooms are popular for larger groups and to rehearse group presentations. Whiteboards are still in demand, regardless of other technologies and collaboration tools available.

Students move from the Commons area into the quieter parts of the Library when they want to concentrate on individual study or when they are studying for exams.

Requests for help with a range of issues are addressed to the "Ask us" desk at Bathurst, although it is not yet set up as a single point of contact for the full range of learning support issues. Students like to be able to ask someone for help when they can, although the full range of online and telephone services are also well used.

Students regard the social aspects of campus life as an essential ingredient of the on-campus experience: a feeling shared by Distance Education mode students when they are on campus for residential schools which are part of their course. The Commons and the student bar are cited as significant aspects of that experience.

### What were the main lessons learned?

Feedback from Bathurst used to inform the design of the TLC indicates the following:

- Furniture and equipment must be reconfigurable by the users on demand
- Fixed workstations are valued only when applications require high speed and good bandwidth connectivity
- There is an increasing demand for videoconference access to group members who are physically scattered
- Noisy social spaces are highly valued for most activities, but students want to move to quiet spaces for tasks requiring in-depth thinking and for exam preparation – ability to reconfigure spaces at different times in the academic year should be considered in the design
- Flexibility is the key: usage changes very fast with or without corresponding changes in technology
- Never underestimate the indoor/outdoor flow of activity. Students like to work outdoors even when climatic conditions are far from inviting

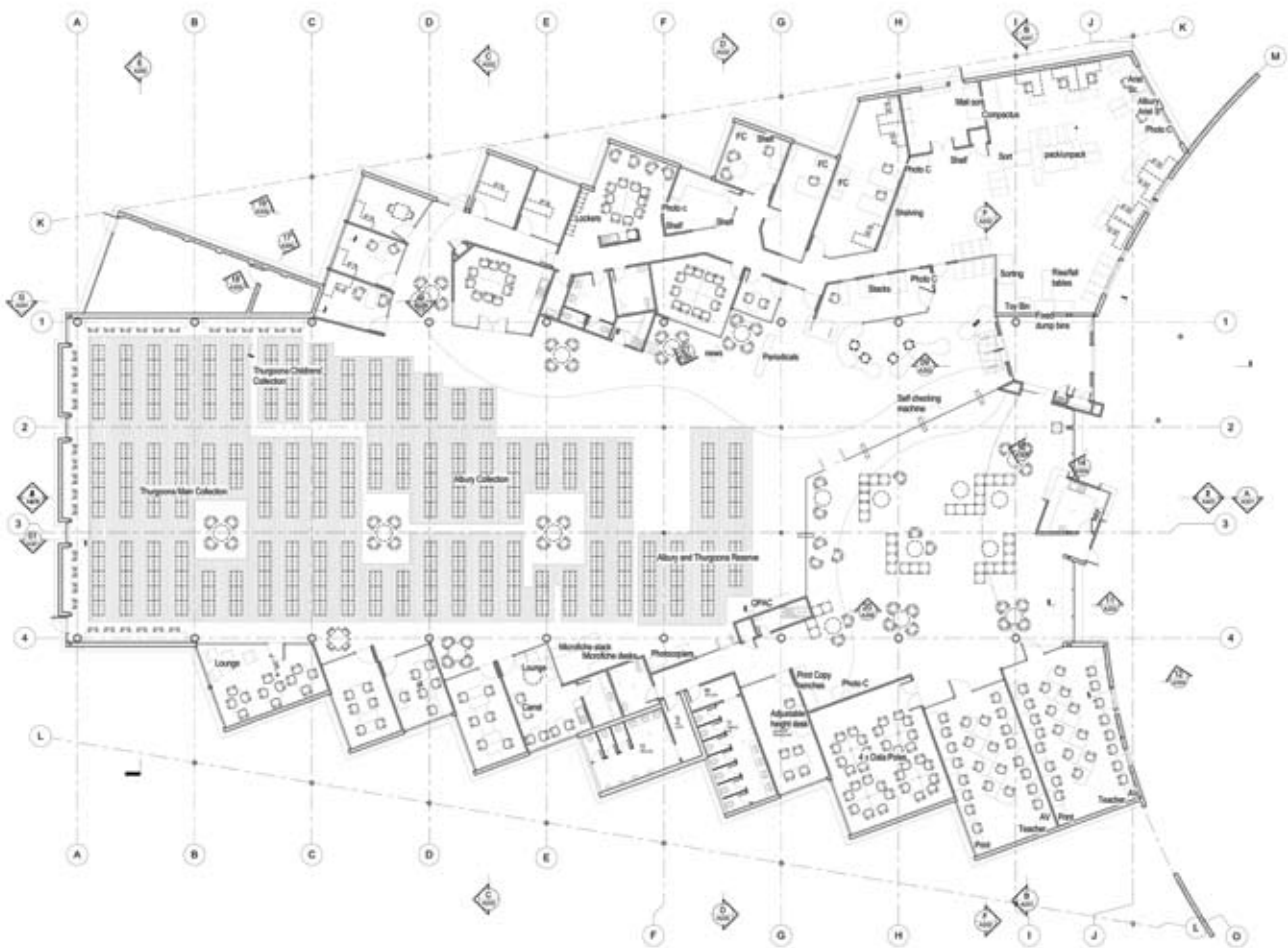
### Acknowledgements

Academic staff at the Thurgoona Campus gave considerable input to the pedagogical map for the Learning & Teaching Precinct and how different nodes in the Precinct could be used to provide a comprehensive learning experience. These discussions were initiated by Caoimhin Ardren, Project Manager for the Campus development and facilitated by staff in the Centre for Enhancing Teaching & Learning led by the Director, Associate Professor Marian Tulloch.

Leslie Burr, Director, Learning & Access Support championed the principles underlying the concept of the Single Point of Contact within the University.

Staff of the Divisions of Library Services, Student Services, and Information Technology contributed to (and continue to develop) models for delivery of seamless services to students and for how operations will be managed in the TLC building. Kerryn Amery, Director, Operations (Library Services), Liz Smith, Manager, Learning (Student Services), and Phil Sefton, Director, Customer Services (IT) lead the teams developing service alignment and management models.

Doug Westland and Bernard Jovaris from JWP Architects translated the concept models into a physical building and provided the floor plan.



**Charles Sturt University – Thurgoona Learning Commons**  
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JWP Architects