



Learning in the Learning Commons: The Learning Commons at City Flinders and St Albans Campuses

What it is?

Since 2006, the development of the Learning Commons has been a key strategic direction for Victoria University, driving the re-development of libraries, campus learning spaces and educational support services and programs. This study will report on evaluations of two examples of the Learning Commons at VU: the City Flinders Learning Commons and the St Albans Learning Commons, with a focus on the impact on student learning achieved at each location.

Why it is?

At VU the Learning Commons aims to put the student 'at the centre' by providing an educational one-stop-shop, integrating services and functions that have been separate in the past. According to Keating and McLennan (2005, 10):

... students should not have to understand the organisational structure of the University in order to access the support and resources they need for their learning ... [The Learning Commons] is a learning space that is open – in terms of reflecting the need of students to learn when they have time – often outside the usual University opening time and also reflecting students preference for flexible spaces that can be moulded and modified to suit their preferred learning styles ... The Learning Commons is an approach to supporting our students' learning that recognises that we need to take into account the entire learning experience of the learner while at university, not just their time in the classroom.

The Learning Commons has been guided by a set of principles designed to make learning the primary focus. These principles are that the Commons should:

- o Facilitate active, independent and collaborative learning;
- o Focus on student needs, preferences and work patterns;
- o Be part of a University-wide development of learner autonomy;
- o Be responsive to the changing needs of learners for resources and support;
- o Be based on collaboration between different support areas in the University; and
- o As a community space provide a hub for physical and virtual interaction for staff and students.

What happens here?

The City Flinders Learning Commons opened in October 2006 and became a testing ground for the Learning Commons model developed at VU. Against a background of striking city views, the Commons combines a library collection, diverse spaces to support different learning styles and a mix of educational services and programs. The St Albans Campus Learning Commons was developed in mid 2007 through the large scale refurbishment of the existing Library space, including the development of new discrete learning spaces as advanced 'assisted study' environments.

At both locations educational support services and programs are provided through a collaboration between the Library; Academic Language and Learning (ALL) and Student Career Development (SCD) staff in the VU College (VUC); and Information Technology Services (ITS). At the centre of the new service model are Student Rovers, who offer student peer mentoring to provide practical and motivational learning support for students

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Table 1. Learning Commons Services and Metrics.

	CITY FLINDERS	ST ALBANS
Opening Date	Oct 2006	Aug 2007
Architects	Fish, Payne, Pattenden and Viney Ltd	McIldowie Partners
Size	980m ²	2530m ²
Total Learning Spaces	184	404
Student Numbers	3905	8406
Student Computers	93 (PCs, laptops, MACs)	130 (PCs, laptops,)
Computer per Student	1:42	1:65
Equipment Costs	\$185,000	\$260,000
Building Costs	\$1,250,000	\$650,000
Services	Library, IT, Learning Support, Careers, Student Rovers	Library, IT, Learning Support, Careers, Student Rovers

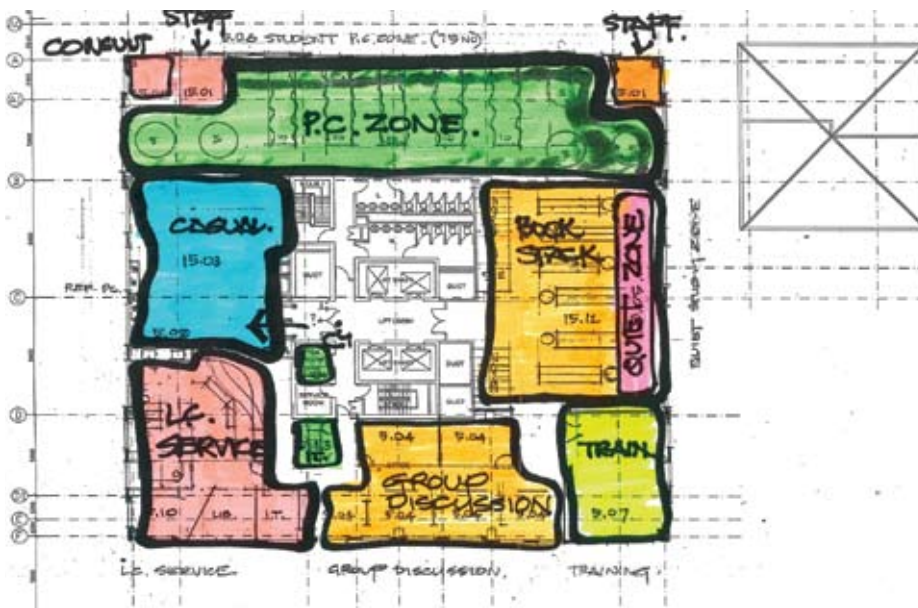


Figure 1. City Flinders Learning Commons (Blocking)



Figure 2. St Albans Learning Commons

How is the space used?

Each Learning Commons contains a variety of learning spaces to support different learning styles ranging from informal, collaborative, technology intensive, formal (training areas) and reflective. Although neither learning space contains a café, both are food-friendly to encourage the social use of each space.

A Learning Commons service model has been developed to coordinate educational support services to students in these spaces and set the pattern for collaboration and cooperation in the provision of services. This model works to a background of automated self-help and embedded support at the course and faculty level. The three layers of the model delineate services from first level enquiries to technical or functional support at service desks up to the specialised consultations and training required for advanced information seeking and knowledge creation.

The first level of this service model relies heavily on the 'Rover' team involving later year VU students. They are selected and trained by the collaborative team formed by Library, IT and ALL staff, coordinated by an ALL academic and supervised by campus librarians on a daily basis. The Rovers' role includes:

- Assisting with basic student queries related to using and locating core facilities, information resources, software and hardware
- Helping students to clarify and articulate basic issues related to their learning strategies
- Directing students to options or to further information that may assist them, or referring them to ITS, Library, ALL or SCD staff or other services such as Counselling.

As successful students, Rovers mentor student 'communities of learning' by modelling and facilitating successful approaches to learning. They systematically share knowledge, skills and insights through a RoverSpace blog and wiki, thereby also developing their VU Graduate Capabilities (including teamwork) and fulfilling learning in the workplace requirements. Thus the Rover program is deeply embedded in social and collaborative learning models, both in the context of the Rover team itself and insofar as these models underpin the relationships between Rovers and others.

How is technology used?

Technology is a pervasive feature of the Commons aiming to be the major point of student computing on campus with access to a standard desktop image supplemented by specific learning software, a complete wireless network and printing/scanning infrastructure. This level of technology is essential for delivering program content via WebCT, administrative

processes through the MYVU student portal and digital information resources. The University also recognises the potential of social networking Web 2.0 technologies and therefore provides Internet access in a relatively unrestricted environment.

How was the facility evaluated?

Most attempts to measure the success of the Learning Commons have focused on indicators of activity or measures of user satisfaction. The task of assessing the impact of the Learning Commons on student learning is more difficult and beyond the scope of the most commonly used metrics and evaluation tools. Bennett (2005) notes that in 240 construction and renovations projects in libraries from 1992 to 2001, there was a lack of evaluation of resultant student learning. One challenge in assessing the impact on student learning is the difficulty of getting students to articulate their learning experiences when collecting data and feedback. Student feedback can be restricted to their access to resources within learning spaces or the basic activities that are undertaken in the Commons,

presented without commentary or self-reflection. A more detailed articulation of learning impacts may require a relatively atypical meta-cognitive awareness of their own learning on the part of student Commons users, as well as a set of beliefs that recognises and legitimises collaborative and peer learning rather than being restricted to a transmission model. Thus a successful evaluation of the Commons as a site for non-transmission forms of learning may depend to some extent on the success of the whole institution in moving away from transmission models and developing meta-cognition in its students.

The VU enabling principles of the Commons (outlined above) are the focus of our assessment, with particular attention to ways in which the space supports active, collaborative and independent learning; provides a community space as a hub for physical and virtual user interactions; and offers flexible support that can effectively respond to the changing needs of learners.

In terms of evaluative techniques, some quantitative evidence of the success of the facility is required as context for our evaluation of learning outcomes. This includes usage and services statistics along

with measures of student satisfaction traditionally collected by the library. However to provide evidence regarding the Learning Commons impact on student learning, a range of qualitative data has been collected including survey comments, focus group transcripts, student diaries and Rover end of shift reflections.

The student survey comments were derived from the Library Client Survey conducted in second semester 2007 using a service quality instrument developed by Insynch Surveys. A total of 1684 comments were provided in the responses from users at the City Flinders and St Albans Learning Commons. Thematic categorisation of these comments was undertaken loosely following the approach outlined by Ryan and Bernard (2003) in examining repetitions and key words in context.

A series of focus groups were conducted in May 2008, including two student sessions at both City Flinders and St Albans, along with a session containing a selection of staff who directly provide services in the Commons environment. Student volunteers were recruited by Rovers and library staff from the floor of each Commons, and the groups were conducted by a researcher from the University's Post Compulsory Education Unit. Analysis of the results followed a focus on thematic content following the approach outlined above.

The student diaries combined features of mapping diaries – as inspired by the 2007 University of Rochester Undergraduate Project (2007) – and reflective diaries allowing students to comment on their activities within each space. The students were recruited at the City Flinders Learning Commons and before commencing the diary, were instructed in the diary tool by the campus librarian. They were also provided with some examples of the general categories of data needed to be collected, with a view to focusing attention on the meta-cognitive aspects of the survey. However care was taken to avoid the 'Hawthorne Effect' and ensure the diary instrument was not distorting students' learning behaviours through recording them.



Lastly, data examined in relation to the Rover program included transcripts of Rover Debriefing sessions and Rovers' End-of-Shift Reports. These were thematically analysed as described above.

A crude form of evidence of the Commons' responsiveness to students' needs is provided by usage and satisfaction data. Visit statistics at each Commons provide encouraging data on usage, with the City Flinders door count increasing by 85 percent from 2006 to 2007, while the St Albans Commons experienced a more modest increase with usage rising by 25 percent when comparing first semester 2008 door count to the same period in 2007. More evidence of the popularity of the Commons is provided by SCD (Careers) statistics from first semester 2008; all categories of service had increased when compared to the same period in 2007, with a 90 percent increase in 'drop in' enquiries and consultations suggesting that the reach of the service is benefiting from inclusion in the new educational service model of the Commons. Another positive indicator evidenced in the Library Client Survey was that overall library client satisfaction has increased by 10 percent since the library has been a Commons.

Of the qualitative comments attached to the 2007 Library Client survey, about 19 percent of overall responses related to student learning areas and 29 percent related to student computing needs. Unfortunately the comments did not contain many reflections on the capacity of the space to support different learning styles; most responses on both individual (reflective) and group (collaborative) spaces were calls for more learning spaces, particularly at City Flinders. However the fact that these were often combined with complaints about noise suggests that provision for silent and group study need to be carefully balanced, difficult in a very small space such as City Flinders where the Commons zone constitutes the entire Library. Comments on student computing provided few insights into the role of the technology in learning outcomes as these issues were swamped by an overwhelming demand for the provision of more PCs. Other comments requested not only more study rooms for collaborative work

but also protected spaces for individual study. At City Flinders, this emphasis may be a result of the large numbers of Postgraduates studying onsite. Some comments at St Albans called for more casual (social) areas; however the utilisation of the Commons as a social space was not a strong theme in the responses and more likely to be identified as a source of disruption. Where the recent St Albans renovations were discussed, the response was generally favourable as students appreciated the visible investment in their spaces. Typical comments include:

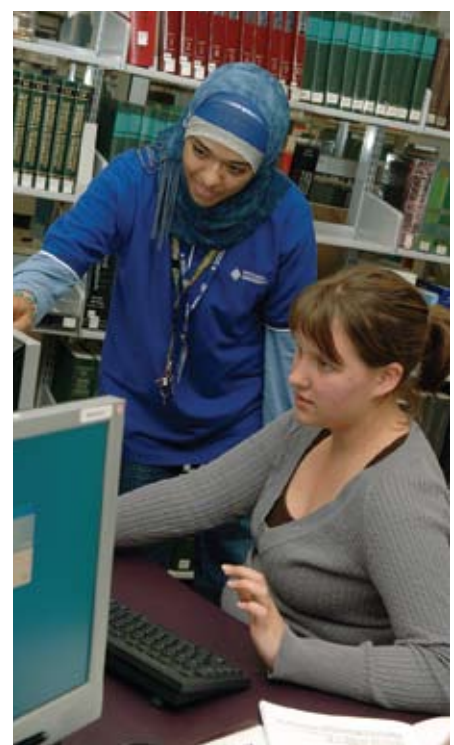
Unfortunately I think there has been a reduction in private study areas. It's great that there is (sic) now areas for groups but there needs to be more places for individual study [City Flinders]

The new renovation for the campus library is fresh and gives off a welcoming vibe [St Albans]

In comparison with the survey data, the focus groups provided more fertile ground for exploring participant experiences relating to learning in groups and the role of the Commons as a social space in the development of communities of practice. Although much of the discussion still registered student concerns about shortages of spaces and resources, the group discussion was able to express the regularity and context of working in groups, its place in the curriculum and an understanding of the value of group work:

Yeah group assignment, then we definitely have to work in groups and then by doing so we do the interaction straight away in front of the computer ... we talk, that's it. [St Albans]

Gives us that opportunity to be able to learn, to work with other people because there [may be] that reality when we go into the workplace. [City Flinders]



The social dimension of learning and the presence of community within the Commons is an encouraging thread of discussion. Throughout the focus groups, participants express an easy confidence with technology suggesting attributes of the 'net generation' identified by Lippincourt (2005), such as multi-tasking between applications and moving seamlessly between the academic and the social through technology:

I think it's different for each person. I know if I sit there and try and ... just sit there and write just non-stop I'll just burn out and lose interest so what I'll do is I'll type up a paragraph, check MSN, just have a chat to some people and then back to - - - (again) - - - [St Albans]

In contrast to the survey data, the presence of community was identified in focus groups as tending to focus students on their work:

In here I guess you get more motivated because you see others studying but when you're at home you get to do some other stuff that's not study related....[St Albans]

It was clear from the combined focus group and survey responses that there was an uneven appreciation of the range of educational services and programs provided in the Learning Commons. Although the survey registers consistent satisfaction with library staff and Rovers, there is less recognition of the more recent entrants to the Commons service areas (SCD and ALL Support staff) and of the range of what is on offer or the benefits of the educational one-stop-shop approach. The range of responses is illustrated by the following comments:

Yeah but overall there's help everywhere, from the student Rovers, the service desk, in the tutor centre and then there's the brochures there if you want to know how to reference at least there's areas where you can go for help. [St Albans]

Student A I've seen the careers section in the Library ...

Student B I don't see anyone in there. [St Albans]

I think that the idea is messed up because ... okay you wanted to bring in everything but then the things should have been brought in and there should have been different sections and it should have been managed individually ... what happened here is like ... they just dumped in everything ... they should have different sections for individual studies, different section for... using computers, different section for (giving) books ... [City Flinders]

The student mapping diaries provide evidence of learning in both group and individual contexts adding revealing details about their study patterns and usage of the different parts of the Commons through different periods of the week. Each of the 10 students refers to the Commons as a meeting place, mixing social encounters with acts

of mutual assistance throughout their studies. Technology is a pervasive feature of their activities throughout the week as assignment work and social interaction is conducted through a variety of systems: WebCT, student email, hotmail, MYVU (VU student portal), Google, library databases and Facebook. The diary narratives throw into relief the unmediated nature of much of the activity within the Learning Commons as so much is accomplished through online services such as WebCT, self-service borrowing equipment and the self-service infrastructure of the Commons. Only one participant refers to seeking help on a regular basis throughout the week.

One weakness of the diaries is a tendency for entries to be descriptive without students reflecting on their learning experiences. When instructing students in using the diary, it is difficult to encourage reflection without inadvertently transforming instead of documenting student practice. In fact Catherine Tang (2002) recommends that reflective diaries work best as a tool to facilitate both reflection and learning in a cycle where understanding reflects on practice and where improvements in practice, fed by reflections on learning, are encouraged. In this context the diaries may work better as part of an assessment tool embedded in academic programs where students can relate their growth as learners and present the contributions from the Learning Commons as part of this broader learning development.

The ongoing Rover evaluation focuses on the effectiveness of the Rovers in the City Flinders Learning Commons as an approach to supporting other students' learning and to develop Rovers' VU Graduate Capabilities. The qualitative data from the Rovers themselves suggests that the Rover program supports active, collaborative and independent learning both in terms of collaboration with other students and within the Rover team itself. The Rover program does not simply provide an additional element to the Library service delivery model (McCormack and Dixon 2007); Rovers model and advise on the learning behaviours underpinning university study, including active and independent learning.

If they know their way around this place, and can act with confidence, maybe I too can learn all these systems. They even know who to ask when they don't know!

We had a few students come over for a chat, we had four students who wanted to just sit and chat to us about their assignments and tests that they have in the next few weeks. Because we have already done those subjects we gave them a few tips on how to overcome the hardship throughout the term.

A student called Mohammad came and asked for help with accounting....well he was confused with some transaction. I helped him out. He was very happy. He needs help with management accounting as well...so he said he will come back next Thursday, so that Richard (former management accounting mentor) will be here and help him out.

Social and collaborative learning is central to the experience of actually being a Rover, within the Rover team. As well having a physical place at the Rover desk in the student space, Rovers work to create a 'social presence' in the Commons by establishing friendly relationships with as many students as possible. One example illustrated significant social interaction between international and domestic students, the promotion of which is currently a major challenge for the sector:

[I had a] conversation with t[h]ree international students I see regularly, one of them Ahmed ... gave a little lecture on culture which was very interesting! He asked me a few question[s] about w[h]ere I am originally from (Lebanon) and then he said on first impression - including accent, dress etc. I look very Australian but after talking to me about values etc. he said he believes I appear to have Lebanese values imbedded in me ... he said ... I get the best of both worlds in this way!

Lastly, the social aspect of Rover activity extends to staff, with transformative potential relating to staff-student interaction:

I helped out a session tutor find a video-tape! He was an interesting guy – he tutors in the art subjects and we had an interesting conversation on the difference in the arts subject and legal subjects. Let's just say the arts people seem to have more fun when doing assignments - no 3000-word essays on law reform for them!

In fact Rovers extend the space beyond the boundaries of the physical Commons: as a consequence of being very visible and widely acknowledged as 'go-to' students, their advice is sought even when they are not on Rover duty - be it on a different campus, on the train, or in a lecture theatre: 'Few students came and say Hi ... while I was having breakfast in Mc's'.

Yesterday I was in Queen Street Campus Library, and saw many known faces from City library. Guess what! They were thinking I was doing my Rover's shift up there! I helped one guy with Web CT, and told them that Rovers are yet to come to Queen Street Campus Library.

There is a wealth of evidence that Rovers provide the sort of practical assistance required for students to become independent and active learners. Rovers have a sense of responsibility for good functioning of the space:

We are still having trouble with the printing, as some of the computers still have signs popped up saying that the printers have to be re-installed ... Currently, CF1507-10, 27, 54, 51 are not working, ... So please keep an eye on the PCs, Rovers!

The Rovers offer flexible support that is responsive to the changing needs of learners, and are required to learn new things to provide support to other students, for example new desktop applications or new academic softwares such as Turnitin.

Alongside this reflective practice shared on the Rover blog is the ongoing evaluation undertaken by the Rovers as researchers/evaluators of their own practice. This has taken a participatory action research approach. 'Instead of a linear model [of evaluating practice], participatory action research ... proceeds through cycles, 'starting' with reflection on action, and proceeding round to new action which is then further researched' (Wadsworth 1998).

Thus Rovers reflect on their practice and make changes to it. These changes have included the introduction of a Rover desk at City Flinders, thereafter included in the designs for subsequent LCs; a new Rover-developed statistics record sheet to include records of referrals; and a new approach to Rover training and knowledge management including 'Lead Rovers', a new collaborative software platform, Rover webmasters and training teams.

The reflection that Rovers engage in is perhaps summarised by one Rover's description of a single incident. After assisting a student to log in and register on the VU Careers system, the Rover chatted to him about searching for a job. As a result she oversaw the whole process of preparing and sending a job application online, including commenting on his spelling and grammar, and referring him to the SCD resume checking service.

She described her roles in this exchange as 'un-bossy, but laid-back big sister', and 'mentor', commenting:

At the end of that day shift when I was in the train what I ... realised was that at that moment not only professional help took place but a social network between a Rover and a student, a social network between a student and the learning commons, and finally, in a broader sense a network between a learner and VU took place in a positive way.

What were the main lessons learned?

The major evaluation findings have been outlined above. In summary, there is some evidence that the space successfully supports active, collaborative and independent learning, and perhaps more conclusive evidence that it provides a community space as a hub for physical and virtual users interactions and offers flexible support that is responsive to the changing needs of learners.

Specific findings are that:

- The Commons has improved usage and satisfaction statistics
- The space requires careful planning to balance students' needs for quiet and noisy space
- The capacity for students to use technology for both private and study purposes, and to observe other students' study practices appears to assist learning outcomes
- More work is required to increase students' awareness of the types of assistance available in the Commons by improving the profile of each service and the level of coordination between services (although current staffing constraints may be a problem here)
- The Rover program is very positive in terms of collaborative learning within the Rovers team and in Rovers' mentoring role, i.e. a form of collaborative learning shared with student users

However in terms of the evaluation methodology, more effective methods need to be developed to triangulate the perceptions of the Rovers themselves with those of student users of the Commons in order to further explore the Commons as a social space in the development of a learning community. New ways of encouraging students to articulate their learning are required, including gathering data from students who may

be non-users of the Commons spaces. This raises the challenge of students' meta-cognition and the success of the university as a whole in developing the awareness of students of their preferred learning styles and what supports they require. The evaluation of the Learning Commons is therefore an ongoing project, requiring the involvement of a broad range of Faculty and other staff, and a continuing management commitment to active, collaborative and independent learning across Victoria University.

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