LEARNING FUTURES?
LEARNING LANDSCAPES
EVALUATION & RECOMMENDATIONS

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Executive Summary

This evaluation reports on continuing action research that aims to support the University of Ulster as it moves towards new active learning environments; through the Greater Belfast Development (GBD) as well as other new buildings and refurbishments. During the 2016-17 academic year Dr. Jos Boys, Visiting Professor in Learning Landscapes, has been working with CHERP to evaluate work in progress, particularly through its Active Learning Classrooms (ALC) and Active Learning Projects (ALP) initiatives; and ongoing work with the Students Union on creating student informal learning hubs on each campus. To do this we undertook:

- staff focus groups to evaluate perceptions and experiences of active learning, and of the range of learning environments in which this is taking place;
- an all staff email survey assessing university-wide awareness of the Learning Landscapes project; and levels of interest and participation in collaborative, informal and social learning spaces and pedagogies;
- on-going engagement with students union representatives, as they led on developing and evaluating student hub developments.

Overall the aim was to make recommendations about next steps. This is to enable the Learning Landscapes Transitions Project to plan how best to support staff and students through the current period of change, as the university re-orchestrates the pattern of provision and location across it’s various campuses.

The central initial emergent issues that arose out of this evaluation were: 1.) institutional culture is perceived to be behind the times, and systems too inflexible, to properly enable the effective expansion of active learning environments across all campuses; 2.) many UU staff are committed to collaborative and active learning (although their definitions of it are varied) but felt that they often were achieving this despite current spaces and systems, rather than being supported by them; 3.) staff believe that students need more explicit guidance on active learning approaches, and were worried about the quality of student facilities overall.

In the context of research on universities elsewhere, it is suggested that these are common issues, as institutional missions become increasingly complex, particularly where innovative initiatives cut across previous functional boundaries and roles. As well as outlining the challenges, the report suggests seven areas of opportunity, gained from the analysis, for the institution to act on:

- getting the basics right
- improving institution’s own learning
- integrating systems and approaches
- supporting and engaging staff
- supporting and engaging students
- expanding and embedding active learning
- developing learning landscapes activities

Finally the report gives three core recommendations for the ongoing work of the Learning Landscapes Transitions Project via CHERP: 1.) specific activities to support and engage staff in active teaching and learning development; 2.) engagement with relevant university strategies, policies and processes, towards an integrated agenda that takes into account the implications of new Learning Landscapes; 3.) ongoing prototyping and testing of active and collaborative learning by staff and students through both formal and informal new learning environment developments.
Background

This evaluation is based on action research started and implemented as part of an Organisational Development Change Management (ODCM) Learning, Teaching and Student Experience transition programme at the University of Ulster, and now located within Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice (CHERP). The work builds on Dr. Jos Boys’ previous consultancy activities and reporting for the university (2014, 2016, see Appendix 1 for summary). Within the context of the move to the Greater Belfast Development (GBD), as well as additional building and adaptation at other campuses, the overall aims throughout the project have been to:

- Increase awareness of, and engagement with, active learning and learning space design in preparation for moves to new learning environments;
- Develop, implement and evaluate initiatives that support staff & students in active teaching and learning in both new and existing learning environments;
- Enhance the student experience through learning space design and management across existing campuses;
- Assess the barriers and constraints to, as well as opportunities for, positive change.

Underpinning the work is a recognition that thinking about new learning environments is not merely additive to existing university strategies and practices, but demands a much bigger shift towards holistic and integrated planning and organizational structures (Boys 2008, 2011, 2014). The concept of Learning Landscapes (Dugdale, 2009; Neary et al, 2010) or Learning Ecologies (Siemens, 2003; Ellis & Goodyear, 2010) captures the interrelatedness of learning in the many kinds of physical and virtual spaces in which it can take place.

The Learning Landscape is the total context for students’ learning experiences and the diverse landscape of learning settings available today – from specialized to multipurpose, from formal to informal and from physical to virtual. The goal of the Learning Landscape approach is to acknowledge this richness and maximize encounters among people, places and ideas, defined by envisioning overlapping networks of compelling places and hubs which can offer choices to users and generate synergies through adjacencies and the clustering of facilities (Dugdale, 2009: 52).

Within the University of Ulster, and following the CHERP 2015 conference, there have been ongoing developments towards more interactive pedagogic approaches (e.g. constructivist, problem-based, experiential, active learning) demanding more large and small-group teaching in flexible and technology rich spaces. These are being supported by CHERP activities, including awards for Active Learning Projects (ALPs)\(^1\), the prototyping of active learning classrooms (ALCs)\(^2\), as well as through innovative teaching and learning being developed by departments, courses and individuals; and through the creation of new learning landscapes at some campuses\(^3\) that are already offering opportunities for staff to teach within a greater range of flexible learning environments, with more interactive, informal and social types of learning. As part of the

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\(^1\) In total there have been 27 Active Learning Projects funded by CHERP
\(^2\) For 2016-17 active learning classrooms/ studios were 3G05 16G25 17C22; and the digital classroom was 15J19.
\(^3\) The focus groups included participants who had or were using the recently completed teaching blocks in Belfast and Coleraine.
students as partners’ agenda, CHERP has also been working with the Student’s Union to create new informal student learning hubs on each of the existing campuses. These initiatives all sit within the university’s wider strategic goal for Learning, Teaching and Student Experience that learning spaces should be ‘student-centred’ rather than ‘teacher-centred’; have the necessary technology to meet student and subject needs; support pedagogic, multidisciplinary, multimedia formats that engage students and are flexible, ergonomically comfortable, functional and multi-useable.

This, then, is an important moment as which to evaluate perceptions and experiences of active learning, and of the range of learning environments in which this is taking place; and to make recommendations about what next steps the institution, faculties and departments, support services, students and academics can take to further embed effective active learning landscapes as a central element of the university’s provision. In parallel, the Learning Landscapes Transitions Project aims to plan how best to support staff and students through the current period of change, as the university re-orchestrates the pattern of provision and location across its various campuses.

**Stage One 2016-17: evaluation context**

Following Dr. Jos Boys’ appointment as Visiting Professor in Learning Landscapes for the period 2016 - 19, it was agreed that the initial foci for Stage One (2016-17) for the Learning Landscapes Transitions Project would be:

1. An evaluation of UU Learning Landscape activities to date, in order to provide a strong evidence base for future developments, comprised of:
   a. Focus group based data collection and comparative analysis of staff perceptions and experiences of active learning and of a variety of learning spaces;
   b. All staff email survey (to be followed by all student email survey at the beginning of the 2017-18 academic year) assessing university-wide awareness of the Learning Landscapes project; and levels of interest and participation in collaborative, informal and social learning spaces and pedagogies.

2. The expansion and review of new and current learning spaces and projects:
   a. Active Learning Classrooms;
   b. Other learning spaces and projects;
   c. Student Hubs on each campus

3. The drawing out of implications, recommendations and action planning for short, medium and long term embedding in relationship to:
   a. Academic development;
   b. University strategies;
   c. Learning Landscapes projects and initiatives.

In support of these aims, CHERP has funded Active Learning Project (ALP) grants to individuals and groups to explore relationships between pedagogy and space; has developed prototype spaces – Active Learning Classrooms (ALCs) - to help meet and learn from some of the demand for appropriate learning landscapes for active learning; and has partnered with the Students’ Union, who are leading on developing self-directed learning hubs.
on each campus. The evaluation reporting aspect of this work has been undertaken by Jos Boys, supported by Amanda Platt (CHERP research associate), under the guidance of Prof. Diane Hazlett, CHERP Director. This current round of evaluation work is taking place in the context of the shifting patterns of staff and students across campuses, both because of an organisational re-structuring and through changes to existing building stock. It is also framed by the current UU Five & Fifty Strategic Plan (2016 – 2034), and other related activities such as Faculty re-groupings, the impact of the TEF framework, the university’s professional development strategy and the ongoing institutional review and improvement of curriculum design processes.

Evaluation - emergent issues

Through 2016-17 Dr. Boys has been undertaking interviews, meetings and focus groups with University of Ulster staff and students, together with Amanda Platt and Prof. Hazlett. In total there were 7 focus groups (concentrated in April and May 2017), and held across Jordanstown and Coleraine campuses; with a total of 36 staff participating from across disciplines, departments and other campuses.

In addition, we undertook an all staff email survey, which received a total of 138 replies.

The focus groups were each run in a semi-structured way, framed by a series of open-ended questions that were then developed by each group through discussion. For more details of the grounded theory research methodology used, see appendix 2. This is an approach that starts from what the data itself reveals, rather than some pre-decided theoretical approach. As issues emerge, relevant conceptual frameworks and research literature are brought to bear, to enable ‘higher level’ analysis.

Following focus group transcription, some key themes began to emerge from the initial sorting and coding process of all the comments. These centred on:

- institutional culture
- staff teaching and learning practices
- staff perceptions of student learning experiences.

In addition, we gathered some detailed responses about learning space design and technology issues (appendix 3).

Each of these three issues will next be addressed in turn, followed by the conclusions of a second stage analysis, where the initial sorting and coding categories were integrated into broader, underlying themes. These then set the scene for proposed next steps for the Learning Landscapes Transitions Project.
**Theme 1: institutional culture**

Whilst many participants mentioned positive initiatives across the university around active learning and new learning spaces, overall institutional culture was perceived as being behind the times in this area, compared both to other universities and to current employment practices. Existing university systems such as timetabling, room booking and PRD processes were seen as inflexible and difficult to change. Some staff felt they were not being supported at institutional levels in developing active learning, or by having their voices heard. Some strong feelings of disconnect were experienced between what was said in policy and mission statements and what was actually happening on the ground. Some also noted the effects this was having on staff goodwill and motivation, and pointed out the potential for unintended consequences that could make future changes worse not better.

*I mean I really like working here but we are really so many years behind the curve; aren’t we really? When I was at another university] 8/9 years ago they had one, these learning hubs were starting to appear and you know that was about 10 years ago and we are still playing catch up.*

*You know our space is just not able to compete in any stretch of the imagination. So we as lecturers have to go that bit further to try and keep things going…* 

*…what I would hate to happen is we would have this fabulous junked up looking building but the academics were so stressed and feeling burned out that the learning experience … the learning experience is not just about your physical space, it is very much about your engagement with your tutor and your peers…*

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVALUATION CODING:</th>
<th>institutional culture perceptions</th>
<th>tensions</th>
<th>Desires</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘top down’ management</td>
<td>Teaching ‘versus’ research</td>
<td>Cross-disciplinarity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor communication</td>
<td>Teaching and research versus research into teaching and learning</td>
<td>Partnering across academic and student support</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Inflexible systems</td>
<td>Disconnect between individual commitment/effort and access to power/resources</td>
<td>Integrated, flexible systems</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Behind the times in relation to current education and employment practices</td>
<td>Staff expectations of what teaching involves/resistance to alternatives</td>
<td>Learn from best practice</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students ahead of staff with technologies</td>
<td>Differential attitudes and approaches across departments</td>
<td>Reflect collaborative practices in professional employment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Some positive initiatives</td>
<td>Mismatch of support/time/resources for staff with existing workload</td>
<td>Awareness raising/more sharing/increasing visibility</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of valuing staff/staff motivations/importance of enthusiasts</td>
<td>Mismatch between existing demands/rewards and learning landscapes development</td>
<td>Move towards critical mass/embedding as normal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of support in managing workloads</td>
<td>Reliance on goodwill in situation of stress/uncertainty</td>
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*Table 1: Initial coding of staff perceptions and experiences of institutional culture*
**Theme 2: teaching and learning practices**

When staff were asked to describe their teaching and learning practices, they offered a variety of ways of framing their activities, but which predominantly showed a commitment to active and inclusive learning. There were many instances of exemplary work; and of individuals and teams continuously working to develop and improve courses (for example, in relationship to resource effectiveness, student experience and student performance). However, participants were deeply aware that their practices were very dependent on context. This was both in relation to the effects of discipline area, cohort size and level, and accessibility of rooms, facilities and resources; and in terms of the attitudes of colleagues and managers, There were many descriptions of undertaking active learning despite non-conducive spaces and group sizes such as large and inflexible lecture theatres, or poorly designed class rooms; and many comments about problems of working with poor quality equipment. The impact of how other classes were being taught and the commitment (or lack of it) more generally across a course, department or faculty also emerged as a key theme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Approaches</th>
<th>Inclusive</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Reflecting professional world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-based</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immersive</td>
<td>Informal/diagnostic/personalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>Peer mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended/flipped</td>
<td>Integrated/team teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology supported</td>
<td>Co-created assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online/virtual</td>
<td>Learning communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block teaching, not sequential</td>
<td>Improving student induction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Initial coding of staff teaching approaches*

...for us is about moving away from the idea of the teacher as the facilitator with the knowledge and giving that over as a didactic approach; it's more about collaboration, learning from members of the class and breaking down the power barriers...

So what we try to do is take a problem based approach and take an assignment and let's see how it would work on getting an answer to it and which databases we would use.

We are trying to get a service model that is going to work in our new space and that means that staff will come out from behind the information points and actually be immersed with the students so that they will be at the point of need rather than the user having to come to look for the member of staff.

Basically we have tried to flatten the hierarchy of the classroom and have no centre, no podium and no place where we can bestow our knowledge on the students. So tried to make it much more active in terms of what we do using flipped classroom techniques and mind-mapping and brainstorming on movable whiteboards.

One of the things I was trying to do, our numbers are usually in around 160/170 so we are always in U123 (large lecture theatre). So I have always tried to have some kind of active learning process going on there, whether it's throwing out questions using Turning Point handsets or whatever just to get some interactivity going. I mean our tutorials are still in around the 70 plus students, so even when we are trying to do the more hands on stuff it is still fairly large.

...we do flipped learning and the learning takes place outside the classroom and then they come in and we discuss whatever and we get them to try out things in their own classrooms and then come back and discuss.

What was good was that other students could opt in and also the diagnostic tool was run again with different questions to keep assessing their progress so you were, I suppose, building confidence in them as well if you were improving your grade.

What was useful for the year 2 students was having them there and they were able to get Edge accredited for having done the peer mentoring system and as well because we had some money from the funded project we were able to pay them. So it was beneficial for them but also helping them with their transferrable communication skills.

In my area as well there is a move towards collaborative working in a professional sense and how this could maybe be reflected in the educational side as well.
**Theme 3: Student experience**

Many participants told us that some students could be initially resistant to active learning, and be made uncomfortable by their experiences of new learning spaces, particularly if this was not a ‘norm’ within their course as a whole. They mainly recognised the importance of explicitly framing how a course was being taught, and of providing appropriate scaffolding support. Some also felt that the space, in providing clues about what kinds of teaching were taking place, could help or hinder students’ active engagement. Overall staff felt that active learning approaches improved engagement, and could give instances of better cohort performance. Again the impact of the wider context was stressed. In many cases (particularly on the closing campuses) students were seen to show low morale and lack of motivation. There were many comments about the poor quality of student facilities, both in existing classrooms and beyond them, in circulation and service areas. In addition, some participants worried about the lack of consistency of student experience across courses and contexts, suggesting that there was a potential problem in this very wide variation.

Staff also showed a willingness to, and enthusiasm for, engaging with students beyond the formal structures of teaching and monitoring. There were many examples beyond the classroom of informal interactions, of diagnostic support processes and of learning opportunities (such as mentoring schemes and internships).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>academic perceptions</th>
<th>enabling techniques</th>
<th>Space/technologies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of conventional lecture/seminar/tutorial</td>
<td>Explicit intro to active learning/clear structure</td>
<td>Can improve engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different attitudes to variety of experience</td>
<td>Student engagement processes</td>
<td>Can help active learning in large groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low morale</td>
<td>Variety of types of assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor student facilities</td>
<td>Diagnostic/personalized support</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Peer mentoring</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More informal staff student interactions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff engagement with student perceptions and experiences/asking for and responding to student feedback</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making use of and facilitating student expertise e.g. internships</td>
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**Table 3: Initial coding of staff perceptions of student experiences**

What I found with the pilot project last year, we had maybe 6 sessions in the Hub in Jordanstown and 6 sessions in the traditional lecture classroom. It became apparent very quickly was that in the traditional classroom the students came in, walked back down to the back row and started to fill that up and the top [front] 3 rows were left empty. There was already a reluctance, they just sat there ready to be told the information and not really wanting to engage. Whereas whenever we went into the more active Hub area with the movable furniture, there was an expectation there, they came in knowing that they were going to have to engage because they were going to be asked questions as I was moving in and around them whereas you cannot physically do that in the previous rooms ... I thought that was an interesting finding from our study.
Recognising tensions and complexities

These findings in many ways reflect the findings of evaluations in universities elsewhere, as institutional missions become increasingly complex, within a changing and often difficult political and financial climate (Boys 2014). This is perhaps most crucially occurring where innovative developments - such as the learning landscapes agenda - inherently cut across pre-existing functional boundaries and roles; and make demands on institutions to find ways to become more integrated and flexible.4 This can produce a complicated range of tensions and even contradictions that are felt at both institutional and individual levels (many of which were evidenced in our focus group sessions), for example:

• Organisational structures remain disciplinary and department-based despite service and academic staff desires for trans-disciplinary engagements;

• Learning Landscapes development is inherently cross-organisational and inter-disciplinary, requiring a complex knowledge base, but does not fit under current conventional remits for senior managers or within existing structural divisions;

• Learning Landscapes has to be an institution-wide project but is too often implemented through the proliferation of multiple disconnected initiatives;

• There is pressure for development of innovative pedagogies and small group teaching in a context of high workloads, large student cohorts and organizational uncertainty;

• Personal teaching development is simultaneously expected to ‘fit around’ research and other duties - and to be central to the core business, values and ethos of higher education.

• The educational principle of collaboration and collegiality can sit in opposition to competitive ‘claiming’ and protection of innovations and associated resources;

• The scale and complexity of the Learning Landscapes project leads to difficulties in communicating effectively across the whole institution - despite the importance of consultation and dialogue;

• Individuals tends to work within and therefore see just a part of the bigger ‘jigsaw’, leading to important issues ‘falling down gaps’, a tendency to blame other for perceived problems, and a confusion over roles and responsibilities;

• Innovation tends to rely on individual champions; but there is a disconnect with the implications – that depending on individual goodwill, time, energy and resources can lead to stress and burn-out;

• Staff assumptions about what active learning/new learning landscapes requires of them can prevent engagement because staff anxieties about innovation centre on not ‘looking stupid’ to students and other staff (particularly

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4 Where universities ineffectively deal with cross-cutting themes such as active learning, diversity (Ahmed 2012) and sustainability (Hoover and Harder 2015), research meta-analyses show that tensions and contradictions can remain unresolved – merely becoming endlessly restated; or only dealt with ‘at the level of appearances’ so that a wide (usually unrecognized) gap can develop between rhetoric and reality.
because of lack of confidence with technologies);

• Flexible timetabling and room booking, is crucial to supporting active learning, to prevent a mismatch between rooms and learning strategies but remains constrained by conventional modeling of space occupancy and inflexible systems;

• Difficult choices have to be made between re-producing spaces and technologies that ‘work’ versus innovating with cutting-edge but more high-risk facilities.

All the above tensions can lead to a lack of effective mechanisms for the management of change in universities. Rather than developing more integrated systems and approaches, across the sector there tends to be an ongoing reliance on individual commitment; short-term initiatives and projects; and small separate – usually marginal - units or working groups. This is the context in which next stage developments are being proposed.

In our focus groups we finished by asking staff to discuss what they saw as future challenges and opportunities. As can be seen from Table 4, this aligned with many of the sector-wide difficulties already described. In the next section, then, I will outline what the implications are for the university, and what change activities it needs to consider over the next two years, during campus re-organisation and the move to the Greater Belfast Development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Future challenges</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived lack of consultation on GBD &amp; new teaching blocks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff uncertainty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issues with existing campuses not being dealt with</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognising time/resource issues in enabling active learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff finding out about/keeping up to date with new technologies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Importance of good facilities for students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting basics right/having stuff that works</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pressure on spaces/allocating appropriate spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff fears of being ‘out of control’ in classroom, using learning methods/technologies they are not confident about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting staff effectively in/for changing contexts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of integrative approach across curriculum design and active learning principles</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Future opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building on existing in-house expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment in staff as well as buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing importance of individual enthusiasts through support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move to collaborative environments in GBD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing new teaching methods that reduce workloads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop active learning as low-tech version (activity-based, whiteboards/worksheets and table-based groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize that active learning already going on (although may not be described in this way).</td>
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<tr>
<td>More flexible and appropriate room booking/timetabling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved communication/raising awareness</td>
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Table 4: Staff considerations of future challenges and opportunities
Finding opportunities, responding to challenges

The next step in this evaluation was to take the emergent pattern of themes and sub-themes, and use this to draw out underlying patterns, so as to generate an overview framework for future action. This analysis generated seven key opportunities:

- getting the basics right
- improving institution’s own learning
- integrating systems and approaches
- supporting and engaging staff
- supporting and engaging students
- expanding and embedding active learning
- developing learning landscapes activities

Each of these will be explored in turn.  

1. getting the basics right: As noted above, a considerable amount of discussion across different focus groups was concerned with understandable anxieties about being ‘shown up’ in front of class of students and/or colleagues. Participants gave many examples of having to cope with rooms that were inappropriately sized and furnished, badly maintained/cleaned or had non-working equipment; all of which could interfere with the smooth running of the class and adversely affect student engagement and motivation. This was exacerbated for staff who saw active learning as a more high-risk strategy, because of its requirements in terms of space and technologies. There was an overall emphasis on the importance of improvement of existing spaces as well as new developments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘I would just go back to the simple things, when you go to the lecture theatre if the projector is not working, there is a radio mic there and the battery is flat. Those make a world of difference because they give you a confidence to just to go in and do something.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...well if you want to humiliate a lecturer there is no better way than to not give them audio visual aids, it is just a disaster.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...that thing about having some faith in you lecturer, I can’t control that environment so how am I supposed to control the class?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve environmental conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve existing learning spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local control over heat and ventilation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better quality and maintenance of spaces and equipment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Final themes – 1. getting the basics right

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5 As previously noted, the focus groups enabled us to gather more detailed data on specific preferences for, and comments about, existing learning spaces across the university. This focused on the two student Hubs at Jordanstown (when used for formal, active learning classes), the Active Learning Classroom (ALC) at Jordanstown, the new spaces in U-block at Coleraine, and some other existing spaces. These have been collated in Appendix 3 around 1.) Layout and Furniture and 2.) Technologies, based on using sample comments selected that capture the wider pattern of responses.
2. **Improving institution’s own learning**: There was often frustration expressed by participants that the university was not seen to be learning from what already existed. This was both from beyond University of Ulster – not just other HEIs, but also the best employers’ environments and processes – and from knowledge and expertise already based within the institution. Thus, for example, there are courses/departments with considerable experience of online learning, and others who have already embedded and evaluated active learning in their curricula design. It was also felt that the institution needed “to invest in staff as well as buildings” so as to develop in-house learning about what works.

### Improving Institution’s Own Learning

But this is what really annoys me about here. I mean I really like working here but we are really so many years behind the curve; aren’t we really?

...nobody seems to know what we do because they are not at the coalface ... Just ask us and we’ll tell you ...

It’s great working as a team on this because we bring different things to the party ... we egg each other on ... I don’t think you would have the same passion for working if you were doing it as an individual.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Build on best practice in academia &amp; workplace</th>
<th>Use existing in-house knowledge &amp; expertise</th>
<th>Support committed individuals and teams</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learn from other HEI institutions and employers learning spaces to build on what is already known/implemented</td>
<td>Develop systems and methods to access and build on in-house expertise</td>
<td>Invest more in staff team and collaborative teaching improvements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move from positive but disconnected initiatives to ‘more joined up’ approaches</td>
<td>Embed relevant and effective feedback loops with staff and students</td>
<td>Learn from best in-house practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Final themes – 2. improving institution’s own learning

### Integrating Systems & Approaches

I think even just recognising that it’s all connected ... Flexibility in the timetable and flexibility in the rooms.

Yeah people talk about their timetable but it’s not, it’s a room booking system. It’s very inflexible ... The room booking system is really inflexible and it’s really difficult, it’s set in stone. It’s really difficult to say, ‘I just want to do this in a different type of space’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge ‘silo’ cultures</th>
<th>Develop flexible &amp; appropriate systems and frameworks</th>
<th>Address perceived mismatch between policies and practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear and integrated roles and responsibilities for learning landscapes across institution</td>
<td>Curriculum design and development</td>
<td>Need for partnership between management and staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More academic and teaching cross-disciplinarity</td>
<td>Address long lead-in times for room booking/timetabling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better integration of academic, student support and service staff</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Final themes – 3. integrating systems and approaches
4. supporting and engaging staff: Many participants talked about the effects of a wider culture in their department and faculty, which could enable or hinder more active and collaborative learning activities. They felt that the variation of individual attitudes, both from peers and from managers, meant that their experiences were often inconsistent (from each other and through time with changes in management). This only added to an overall uncertainty. It was suggested that strategies and policies should work towards enabling consistency across the institution, including academic development policies that supported teaching and learning research, and rewarded teaching innovation.

SUPPORTING AND ENGAGING STAFF

'It is also a culture within your own individual department. If the majority of the staff are doing it one way and you are coming along doing it a different way there is an awful lot of resistance ... [...] So if you are seen as the odd one out it does not help your case.'

'That’s part of the reason why there is such resistance to new teaching methods because it is going to take too long and too much of our time and teaching is still very much seen as a secondary activity where research is valued much more.'

'And what I would hate to happen is we would have this fabulous funk ed up looking building but the academics were so stressed and feeling burned out…'

Manage change
- Develop consistency in L+T approaches and expectations across departments/disciplines
- Recognise uncertainty & improve communication processes in response
- Make space for staff networking & mentoring

Support active learning
- Embed as policies and processes, for T+L strategy, curriculum design etc.
- Reward structures for T+L research and practices
- Recognise shift in time/skills/resources planning with active learning

Manage workloads
- Implement explicit policy re tensions between teaching and research
- Recognise reliance on, and reward goodwill/motivation
- Embed and respond to student feedback

Table 8: Final themes – 4. supporting and engaging staff

5. supporting and engaging students: As mentioned above, staff perceptions of the student experience were initially framed by worries about the quality of facilities beyond the classroom. They also felt students could be better engaged through an integrated set of actions - explicit guidance by staff around active learning; more diagnostic support; more variety in how to give evidence of their learning; and more informal types of interaction outside of existing committee structures.

SUPPORTING AND ENGAGING STUDENTS

'It’s about managing expectations because with a lot of the undergrad students they have a lot of the expectations of what, when they are first years, of what university life is going to be like.’

‘Almost it is how you present it at the start, So if I am block teaching Masters typically, and you go in and say ’Look this is a new room and this is going to be a different experience to what you have had before and we want you to get involved and be part of it’…’

‘Again for students coming on to this campus, there is no choice for food, big queues at key times during the day and very little space for them to lounge and meet with …’

‘So [the students] were expecting that the space they were moving up into would have that same kind of, they would have that ownership. So I mentioned it to the course director and ’Would you ever think of having something like that?’ and ‘No!’

Enhanced experience
- Improve quality of student facilities
- Improve equivalence of experience across campuses
- Recognise student expertise through Internships etc.

Manage expectations
- Develop explicit learning and teaching frameworks
- Increase personalised learning/diagnostic support
- Embed and respond to student feedback

Enable engagement
- Increase peer mentoring activities
- Enhance variety of learning and assessment methods
- Enable more informal staff-student interactions
- Develop ‘Students as Partners’ agenda

Table 9: Final themes – 5. supporting and engaging students
6. expanding and embedding active learning: Staff showed a considerable commitment to reflecting on and improving their own teaching practices. However, there were many anxieties about potentially negative impacts on students in developing active learning ‘on the ground’, without enough knowledge or confidence; and in spaces with technologies that were not conducive. Most staff wanted practical and ‘quick’ advice on how to enable active learning, both from academic support, and from the experiences and good practice of their peers.

EXPANDING & EMBEDDING ACTIVE LEARNING

A lot of it is being there and visibility or awareness. […] To increase staff confidence it is that visibility thing and showing staff how it possible could work.

Yeah, so with peer mentoring and observation, even if I know nothing about your subject area, if I could come along and watch how it’s done. I think that takes the fear out of the ‘I don’t know where to start’.

I would love an induction day where someone would say here are 5 brilliant ways that you can engage when you have 120 students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generate ‘critical mass’</th>
<th>Embed active learning support</th>
<th>Learn lessons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Move beyond reliance on individuals through active learning policies and faculty-level support</td>
<td>Develop workshops &amp; resources that can enable confidence and capacity building</td>
<td>Undertake ongoing evaluation of spaces and projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and implement workload models that take into account active learning processes</td>
<td>Develop peer observation/mentoring networks</td>
<td>Reward active teaching and learning innovations and research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restructure timetable around blocks and co-teaching</td>
<td>Invest in staff as well as buildings</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Final themes – 6. expanding and embedding active learning

7. developing Learning Landscapes activities: Staff felt that it was crucial to recognize the importance of staff development and opportunities to experiment around new Learning Landscapes, both for those transitioning to the GBD, and those on existing campuses.

DEVELOPING LEARNING LANDSCAPES ACTIVITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respond to unmet demand for new learning spaces from students and staff</th>
<th>Improve processes for better matching pedagogies with spaces &amp; facilities</th>
<th>Enhance communication and debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create and support more low-tech active learning spaces (collaborative table groups + whiteboards)</td>
<td>Undertake pilot post-occupancy study of new Coleraine block to draw out space/timetabling/learning relationships</td>
<td>Increase visibility and awareness of active learning practices and spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create Student Hubs and other high quality informal learning spaces for students</td>
<td>Work with students as partners to define parameters of student informal spaces</td>
<td>Develop workshops for discussion, knowledge sharing and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue to fund active Learning Landscapes projects</td>
<td>Integrate space and technology strands across university processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Technology supported not technology-led</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Final themes – 7. developing Learning Landscapes activities
Next steps for Learning Landscapes Transitions Project

Although the findings of this evaluation have university-wide implications, recommendations will focus on aspects that can be achieved through the Learning Landscapes agenda, particularly in relation to CHERP’s remit. As the beginning of this academic year, we undertook a visual mapping of the various factors and influences on Learning Landscapes development, which in turn enabled agreement on a Stage One ‘cluster’ of activities to focus on and evaluate. As shown in Appendix 4, this also forms the basis for next stage developments about which activities it is proposed to concentrate on for 2017-18.

In addition, an all staff email survey has helped to gauge current awareness of Learning Landscapes at the University and to capture a snapshot of attitudinal change towards active learning and the types of spaces that can best support it (Table 12). We had 138 replies, well spread across all faculties and departments. Although it is likely that respondents were those most positively disposed to the Learning Landscapes/active learning agenda, the replies still give a useful sense of awareness across the university, as well as indicating both a considerable amount of active teaching and learning already going on (across it’s many variations) and a high demand for more access to active learning spaces. Overall, there was a high recognition of the term ‘Learning Landscapes’ (73%) but less awareness of the specific project at the university. Even here though, over half had heard of the LL Transitions Project. Most crucially, the survey shows high interest in improving active learning methods (interested/very interested = 90%) and a huge demand for access to active learning spaces – 94%.

These results form the basis of 3 recommendations:

Table 12: Key results from all staff email survey
1. Support and engage staff in active teaching and learning development activities through:

- A network of Associate Heads of School (teaching and learning) responsible for monitoring, supporting and integrating development activities across departments and courses;

- The continued investment in staff teaching and learning, for example through action projects across learning landscapes and digital futures; together with integrated reporting and evaluation mechanisms to enhance institutional learning;

- A year-long series of academic development Learning Landscapes workshops that engage staff in ongoing discussion about new Learning Landscapes implications for Teaching and Learning

- The dissemination of good practice through the creation of online tools and resources.

The second recommendation concerns institutional strategies. As the focus group results indicate, there are potential mismatches across different strategies, as well as in the way these are implemented on the ground in different contexts. This is in a situation of structural uncertainty, with many academics expressing feelings of disconnect between strategic direction and their own experiences. It thus suggests that the university:

2. Refine relevant university strategies, policies and processes, to create an integrated agenda that takes into account the implications of new Learning Landscapes by:

- Re-visiting the current Teaching and Learning, and related, Strategies, to embed active learning definitions and approaches;

- Exploring the implications of active learning/new learning landscapes on curriculum design and embed into curriculum review and development processes;

- Prototyping post-occupancy evaluations in the new block at Coleraine; that can then be used in following years at Magee and GBD as these become occupied, so as to enhance institutional learning.

The final recommendation concerns Learning Landscapes development. It is hoped that the university will go on both supporting and expanding active and collaborative learning space design and experimentation across existing campuses. This is likely to include ongoing development of student hubs, informal learning spaces at the Jordanstown campus, and more additional active classrooms, where these can be implemented effectively. This could also include access to technologies, for example, educational apps. However, developments should take into account one of the key findings of the evaluation. Staff assumptions that active learning requires new technology-rich and collaborative learning spaces may be hindering some academics from developing their teaching and learning in more low-tech but vital interactive ways. This frames recommendation three:
3. Prototype and test additional opportunities for active and collaborative learning by staff and students through both formal and informal spaces by:

- Supporting ongoing student-led hubs at each campus, together with potential improvements to students facilities more generally;

- Funding student internships in support of the ongoing Transitions Project developments;

- Capturing student perceptions and experiences of new learning spaces through a email survey;

- Working with the Library at Jordanstown campus to implement and review the effectiveness of more informal learning spaces;

- Making more low-tech active classrooms available (whiteboards and collaborative group arrangements) and explore how to integrate appropriate usage through adapting room booking and timetabling processes.

These recommendations set the framework for the activities of the Learning Landscapes Transitions Project Stage Two (2017-18), as well as its ongoing project management and resourcing planning.

References


Hoover, E. and Harder, M (2015) “What lies beneath the surface? The hidden complexities of organisational change for sustainability in higher education.” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 106 pp175-188


Appendix 1: Summary of previous UU Learning Spaces reports (Boys 2014, 2016)

As noted, this evaluation builds on Learning Spaces scoping work undertaken by Dr. Jos Boys over several years as a consultant with the university. A previous UU Learning Spaces Project evaluation (Boys 2014) revealed three key issues. These were first, the difficulties – expressed by almost all respondents – in being able to engage knowledgeably or effectively with how physical space, technologies and different pedagogic practices are intertwined. Second, there seemed to be a clear unmet demand from students for more, and more varied and appropriate informal learning spaces, enabling self-directed and group study on campus. Third, academic staff felt a lack of available and appropriate taught spaces in which they could experiment, and thus develop, active learning, with their students. Follow-up work (2016) showed that:

- The Learning Spaces project needed to build on already existing commitments towards active learning across the university. The underlying approach should be to increasing impact is by ‘snowballing’ from many small projects to much wider staff and student involvement, building momentum from increasing awareness, through engagement to embedding of active learning/effective use of informal learning spaces and into mainstreaming;

- The central means for developing innovative pedagogies and active learning spaces is through increasing awareness and knowledge of the subject enabling discussion and feedback; and through practical experimentation;

- The ‘students as partners’ theme should remain central and students need to be engaged in every level of development and debate around new learning spaces;

- Learning Spaces project objectives and outcomes need to be more completely embedded within CHERP and other university structures, so as to increase its effectiveness.

These reports have informed LL Transition Project and CHERP priorities more generally; particularly through the funding of active learning classrooms and projects, and the work with the Student’s Union on developing student hubs.

It is clear, though, that many of the findings from our focus groups just emphasise the ongoing issues – a considerable and still unmet demand from staff to have access to more appropriation spaces for active learning and other collaborative pedagogies; and a desire for “investment in staff as well as buildings”.


Appendix 2: Research methodology: using grounded theory

This evaluation was undertaken using grounded theory. This is an approach with two central aims: to develop strategic themes and theories through the analysis of data and to do this in a systematic way so as to enable rigor in dealing with qualitative data. Rather than beginning with a hypothesis, the first step is the collection of data through focus groups, so as to obtain a variety of perceptions and experiences of active learning approaches and learning environments. Key points in the materials collected are marked through a series of themes, which are then extracted from the transcripts. These are framed by key words or phrases that summarize recurring points and issues in the data. These are then grouped into similar concepts in order to make them more workable, and an initial outline is drafted for discussion and review. In this case, both the visiting professor and the CHERP research associate undertook first coding separately, and then compared themes, so to give a richer and more substantive analysis.

The next stage is for these themes to be regrouped into categories. This second process aims to develop understanding and explanations that underpin the evaluation. These in turn can be reassessed by a wider audience or reviewed against relevant existing literature. Grounded theory thus does not aim for a general truth or “solution” but hopes to better conceptualize what is going on in any given situation.

Such an approach does not aim for overall coherence or simplification. Categories may sometimes align, but can also be in tension or even contradictory. They may align better for some participants than for others, depending on what different learners, academics, service staff and managers bring to their situation. In addition, such an approach generates data that can be inconsistent and even contradictory across diverse participants’ perceptions and experiences. This means that there is never one correct solution for the design of learning landscapes or for undertaking active learning that can be drawn from analyzing the data. Engagement with particular spaces depends on what students and academics bring to them, how particular educational processes are played out, and what the space enables or hinders across diverse perceptions and experiences. The aim of such a method of study is to explore the patterns that are revealed—what might be envisaged as “densities” or “bundles” of alignments in which there is considerable overlap across different participants’ perceptions and experiences, but where diversity and difference continue to be recognized. This is what Geertz (1973) famously called a “thick description”—that is, a rich and layered account that does not result in a solution or conclusion but that can valuably illuminate (Parlett and Hamilton 1972) our decision-making.
Appendix 3a: Staff feedback on UU learning space design and technologies – LAYOUT AND FURNITURE

For me active learning doesn’t have to be technology in the room, it can just simply be a whiteboard, getting pen on the [paper]

Well in my room I think there were 4 whiteboards and I kind of, they were so heavy that I could not physically move them. I don’t know who picked them; they were about the height of 6 feet and they went down to the ground.

Then we turned around and actually just used the whiteboards. But that was quite good because they were positioned behind each table and each table was able to do a group presentation and then we were all physically able to turn around and see.

I am interested in the physical layout of the room as a professional, b. that it fits for purpose and c. that it makes my life a little bit easier so that they are not straining their necks to see the screen etc. a bit more up to date and in line with what I see in many other universities.

But the layout is a particular challenge because it doesn’t lend itself to people working, and nor do we have the technology where they can share information together […] they are sitting in lines and their heads are dropped down below PCs and that is a very negative experience for a student in terms of learning.

So we used the reconfigured rooms and that worked well because they were in their groups and with one of them to feed back to the whole group. And the lecturer was kind of facilitating that so you were able to go around rather than just sitting there in the rows in front of them.

The study areas are great because you can move the furniture and chairs around.

And if you do use the rooms, you can move out to the informal areas for a break.

I tried [breakout activities] last year with my students. I gave them break out areas and about a handful of them came back.

We have got these tables that you can move around […] they are quite heavy. Why did they not put wheels on the bottom of the table?

I liked the tables but the room itself is really not a good room because it is so long, too long...

I am encouraging people to move their furniture around to set up optimal spaces so that learning can take place. Sometimes it is very difficult in the University when everything is so set.

I liked them aesthetically but the students didn’t like them and when I tried to get them into groups they were clunky, they were kind of prohibitive… there are 6 chairs around tables in there and with about 25 students that seemed to work.

One of the problems with the chairs, it was very hard to get students into clusters of 4 because the chairs physically prohibited it.
Appendix 3b: Staff feedback on UU learning space design and technologies – TECHNOLOGIES

You may go into that LT one day and there seems to be good Wi-Fi and you go in the next and there is none whatsoever.

The only problem was that the internet connection was a bit sketchy at times.

A problem in the university is that you can't get Internet access. It is very slow.

For us as a school what we would really like is an active room with computers that they can come up and down with the tables. We would like lockers with laptops and you would just swipe your card and get your laptop and put it back.

TurningPoint is fantastic and I use it extensively and you can use it for anything. If someone says a question, people's viewpoints on things can be... Peerwise. It's an online tool that I refer to as social networking with multiple choice questions. We ask our students, after each lecture, to go away and create a multiple choice question about something within that lecture. [...] What they do is build up a repository of the information so they are getting actively engaged with the material after the lecture.

Some of the feedback from the students was that they wanted a screen at the front of that room as well (as for each table). So in the Active classroom and you could show both types of thing.

…each group could focus on the screen. The problem was at times that I was doing things and they were focused on their screen and so they were looking that way while you were lecturing over there.

We are in a different position because we are teaching small numbers and from a technology perspective I think there is less inclination to use that in some respects because you can just ask a question.

QuizIt live [...]. So we create our own games. The student feedback was really positive, they absolutely loved it because they had to work in a group.
Appendix 4: Visual Mapping of UU Learning Landscapes, showing activity clusters for 2016-17 and proposed 2017-18