
Space Utilisation Benchmarking



Background

Effective use of space is vital for many HE providers. Reasons vary but include growth plans, cost pressures, changing learning and teaching requirements, or to make innovative use of technology.

One of our clients asked us to benchmark space management across several institutions. Our client was particularly interested in the management of arts and creative spaces as well as general questions about space utilisation. We asked participants about:

- systems and processes used to derive projected and actual space usage data;
- how targets for space use are calculated; and the level of detail: e.g. space per student per course;
- the extent of shared or bookable creative spaces for art and design related subjects; how such spaces are managed; and any specific targets for these spaces;
- charges to departments/schools for 'no shows';
- the length of a normal day used to routinely schedule timetabled activity; and
- how timetabling is used to drive efficient and effective space use.

Nine institutions participated. Size (from small and specialist up to large multi-faculty), balance of teaching/research focus, and scale and mixture of arts and creative activity varied across the participants. We are grateful to everyone who responded. Despite the variation in providers that we spoke to, there was a high degree of commonality in the challenges faced.

Observations

Addressing cultural challenges enables improved space use

Everyone referenced cultural challenges around improving space utilisation. These challenges varied across institutions, and included everything from entrenched expectations for set lunchtimes, to refusal to engage with central processes, and mistrust of data. Striking an appropriate balance between shared and dedicated space and ensuring central understanding of specific or technical requirements were both identified as particularly difficult.

We were struck by the frequent reference to the importance of senior academic buy-in to any process designed to improve the efficient and effective use of space. This is manifested in senior academic leadership of key timetabling change projects; projects designed to rationalise and simplify the curriculum; engaging and educating academic areas to enable them to undertake space planning themselves; and in one case the co-development of estates strategies with decisions around the future direction of learning and teaching more broadly.

Several institutions used the term 'brokerage' to describe the interaction needed between organisational cultures. Success clearly required significant cross institution working. Structural approaches for



engagement, like space management groups, and the early involvement of academic and professional services staff within local areas were particular techniques used.

We noted that the two institutions reporting the most intensive use of space also either reported no cultural challenge in getting buy-in to actions, or had the most advanced space utilisation data capture techniques. Clearly getting buy-in to more efficient space use is easier when space is very evidently limited. Those that reported that space management was not a particularly high priority understandably saw cultural issues as more challenging.

Clear targets are not seen at course level

Whilst the institutions we spoke to had an understanding of their overall data as returned through the HESA Estates Management Record, none, other than the client who requested this benchmarking, had formal targets to improve the use of space, and no one had space targets at individual course level.

One exception to this was a very large institution that had a sophisticated supply and demand model in place operating at School level that did set expected 'supply' levels as a way of managing space requests; they were exploring the use of more granular course level data but had not yet implemented anything.

No one uses charging policies or fines to address 'no-shows'

None of the participating institutions used internal space charging systems or fines. Some had previously used some form of system but had found the burden and cost outweighed the benefits. There were also unintended behavioural consequences such as the creation of burdensome appeals processes.

One institution is considering the re-introduction of charges in tandem with a new system to monitor attendance (and space usage) based on their existing proximity based University ID card system.

Full utilisation of the teaching day remains an issue for nearly all

The teaching day, and the extent to which it is fully used, was discussed by all participants. All except one particularly 'squeezed for space' participant reported either current or historical issues with people not using the full extent of the day and of the week. Reluctance to timetable at 8/9am or 5/6pm, or on Monday mornings or Friday afternoons, and at particular set lunchtimes create logistical challenges. Some institutions also try to keep Wednesday afternoons free for student sports and societies.

Where participants report progress in resolving peaks and troughs, approaches depend on the nature of the institution, its size, the relationship between the administrative centre and academic departments, and the particular technical approaches chosen. Small and medium institutions show a clear trend towards more centralisation and enforced timetabling across the full teaching day. This included forced staggering of lunch breaks over a period (e.g. 11.00-14.00) and the removal of academic choice beyond the absolute necessity of course requirements. In one large institution engagement and involvement of academic areas in the development, planning and operation of central consistent timetabling systems has been successful. Several institutions have used a sensitive form of 'naming and shaming' to highlight areas of poor utilisation at specific times.

The perceived effect on student experience was commonly raised. Several staff who work in timetabling remarked that 'the student experience' was a frequent reason given for staff not timetabling at less popular times. Whilst one institution was seeking qualitative student views on timetabling, we are not generally aware of evidence to support particular timetabling preferences.



Arts and creative spaces are an area of significant challenge

We spoke to a number of institutions with arts and creative spaces, or high proportions of arts and creative spaces in their estate. Challenges shared were common, including cultural resistance to central timetabling approaches, limited central visibility of dedicated spaces such as studios and performance spaces, and high levels of understanding needed to fully comprehend technical requirements. Art and design was particularly identified as challenging by several institutions due to the highly variable requirements for space that come from operating at the boundaries of creative expression. Many of these subject areas rely heavily on visiting lecturers or staff in the professions to contribute to courses with limited specific availability, and this caused challenges for timetabling and the efficient use of space.

There was no easy answer to address these challenges, but particular initiatives included permission to use creative spaces into the evening on a non-timetabled and locally managed basis. Every institution had a default position that new creative space would be highly flexible, sharable and centrally booked.

Both devolved and centralised approaches were used in these spaces, with a higher degree of freedom even where space management is otherwise relatively centralised. Some institutions accept that only those closest to the activity could make the technical judgements required about what would fit in the space available and how it could be managed. Others were seeking to change this and increase central oversight. Art spaces that reported most space constraint tended towards more centralisation.

Many are considering technology to gather utilisation data

Most institutions relied on physical room audits at set points in the year, or to investigate particular issues, in order to obtain utilisation data. All recognised the limitations of this approach, with one institution now only using it to inform significant developments such as campus master planning. Nearly everyone we spoke to was interested in technology (such as swipe-cards, proximity cards or wifi/phone signals) to support better space utilisation data and were considering some of the new products available.

Only one institution that responded was already using a solution, based on their existing swipe-card attendance monitoring system. This was not without challenges (ensuring people swipe out, and that not all space was timetabled), but did enable useful live data to be generated frequently. One institution had started to experiment with cameras in teaching spaces and with the use of QR codes, but had encountered challenges with data protection issues and the time taken by students to use the codes. All institutions highlighted the need to consider the implications for personal privacy and data protection and potential negative student perceptions associated with surveillance. We are also aware that when institutions introduce attendance monitoring it is not unusual to see spikes in student complaints.

How Uniac can Help

We can work alongside you to design, develop and assure efficient and effective whole-institution approaches to space utilisation. We will work hard to understand the specific context at your institution, and to develop straightforward, pragmatic recommendations informed by best practice.

To discuss this further, please contact Chris Taylor. Email: ctaylor@uniac.co.uk Tel: 0161 2472860

