

Reimagining Academic Workspace

Seminar Report



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Royal College of General Practitioners, Euston Square, London, 16 October 2013

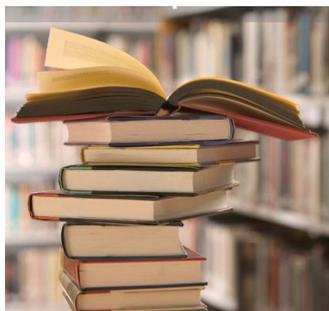
200,000 academic staff in UK universities typically work in office space that differs significantly from the rest of the country's offices. Most academics work, surrounded by books and papers, in their own enclosed individual offices or in small group offices. By contrast, the majority of economy-based employees in the rest of the country work in open offices shared with many other people, and very few books or files. Is this difference essentially due to the special nature of academic work? Are estates and facility managers misguided if they try to rationalise university space by ousting academics from their solo cells? Or is academic workspace on the tipping point of change?

This was hotly debated at a recent seminar hosted by AMA Alexi Marmot Associates attended by thirty representatives of sixteen UK universities. To spark the debate, AMA director Joanna Eley lucidly summarised the viewpoint that academic work is unique: academics need four walls for concentration, to hold tutorials and research meetings, to store and safely retrieve their papers and thoughts. Without this provision, research standards will diminish, a particularly sensitive concern before REF submissions. Revolutionising the traditional expectation of an academic office risks repelling brilliant academics from accepting a position at your university and will lead to an unwinnable battle with valued academic staff.

and others do in contemporary working practices. All office workers, academics included, use digital media most of the time, work anytime, anywhere, travel extensively and, when in the office, cherish exchanging ideas and socialising with colleagues. Spaces that allow colleagues to see one another aid interaction and communication, the flow of ideas and better research. Peace and quiet for concentration can be found by using headphones, going to a library or moving to enclosed, but not owned rooms in an 'activity-based' setting. Academics can certainly reduce the amount of storage now that most material is 'born digital'. Given the small amount of time academics actually spend in their offices – concentrated in term time weekdays, when not in labs or classrooms, and not travelling to conferences or working at home – academics too could support space and economic efficiency in their organisations by working in less space, possibly not even having their own desk.

Alexi Marmot thought both were right – academic working patterns are unique in some ways, and quite standard in others. The important element in determining future academic workplaces is to understand the aspirations, working patterns, beliefs and attitudes of the particular academics and their senior leadership, and jointly discover a solution that works. Through discussion, engagement, garnering evidence and introduction of behaviour change, it is possible to rebalance existing space and create new spaces where great things can happen, improving the academic experience for both staff and students, while using buildings, cost and resources efficiently.

This hotly contested topic evoked many eloquent comments from those tasked with creating and managing university buildings. 'The Vice-Chancellor must lead



AMA Director David Jenkin impressed the audience by illustrating the similarities between what academics

change', 'academic workspace should be part of the university branding' contrasted with seeking an inverted power base not top-down but bottom-up by individual academics requesting innovative ways of using space that would work for them. Estates staff should have communication and people skills to complement their technical skills. They should focus on creating the academic group 'nest', not the individual solo space. 'Bring back departmental libraries and common rooms' as meeting places for staff and students is a welcome call. Since students, the customers, now demand more and better facilities, some thought that the main spatial focus should be the student-staff interface, serving student demands for more and better space and longer opening

hours, even at the expense of the staff space.

The one point on which everyone was united was that universities need to 'get more performance from less space', make all their space work harder, and meet contemporary and future needs while not destroying the heritage of many excellent institutions. As for those academic offices, what is needed is definitely not one-size-fits-all but a nuanced, consultative solution, which helps to break down silos and deliver well-equipped, flexible, yet space-efficient work environments.

AMA would like to thank all the participants for engaging in such a lively debate on this hot topic.

About AMA

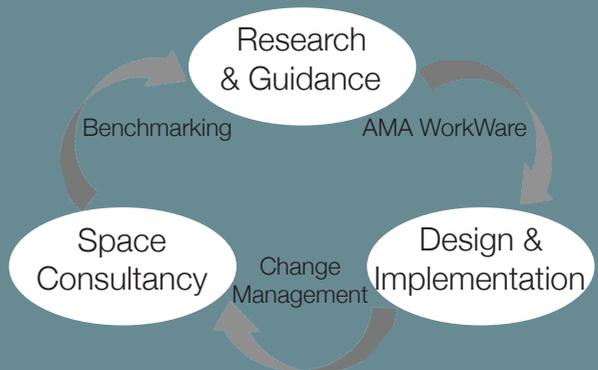
AMA is an independent niche consultancy specialising in design briefing and advice, spatial strategy, change management, post-occupancy evaluation, research, writing, architecture and design. Since our formation in 1990, we have been a leading practitioner in evidence-based design and systematic evaluation of buildings in use. We specialise in working and learning spaces. We use our tried and tested WorkWareLearn toolkit and tailored methods to gather and assess information – to support our clients' understanding of their working, teaching and meeting spaces and to create a better, more sustainable, use of the built environment.

What we do:

- Space consultancy and briefing
- Research and guidance
- Change management
- Architecture and design
- Interior design and space planning
- Post occupancy evaluation

Sectors:

- Government
- Local government
- Corporate
- Education
- Libraries
- Non profit
- Healthcare
- Cultural



...better use of buildings

AMA's mission is to help organisations in using their space effectively to match their needs. We do so by understanding the organisations and their people, staying at the forefront of research and knowledge on the links between people and space, and drawing together psychologists and social scientists with architects and interior designers. We help them respond to new needs, by creating future-proofed buildings. We help with the change management process when new buildings reshape working and teaching practice.

We understand the challenges facing universities:

- Continuing to deliver learning and teaching excellence
- The need to improve the student experience, and respond to evolving demands
- Constraints on space: physical limitations, budget restrictions and energy consumption reduction
- The impact of changes in pedagogy and technology on physical infrastructure
- Increased competition on a global scale
- Allowing for future flexibility, expansion and long-term educational and financial sustainability

AMA's HE services:

- Design & refurbishment
- Briefing
- Procurement advice
- Estate planning
- Space analysis
- Research

AMA is committed to:

- better use of buildings
- working with people and buildings
- evidence-based design
- space for change
- future proof buildings



AMA HE clients

- Bath Spa University
- Sheffield Hallam University
- Cardiff School of Art
- Imperial College London
- Kings College London
- Loughborough University
- University College London
- University of Nottingham
- University of Oxford
- University of the Arts

Contact

AMA Alexi Marmot Assoc.

Linton House
39 Highgate Road
London NW5 1RS

tel +44 (0)20 7284 5888
fax +44 (0)20 7284 5889
mail@aleximarmot.com
www.aleximarmot.com