Learning Landscapes - Research Report

‘In geographical usage landscape is an imprecise and ambiguous concept whose meaning has defied the many attempts to define it with the specificity expected of a science…As a term widely employed in painting and imaginative literature as well as in environment design and planning, landscapes carries multiple layers of meaning…the suffix “scape” posits the presence of a **unifying principle** which enables us to consider part of the countryside or sea as a unit and as an individual, but so that this part is perceived to carry the typical properties of the actually undivided whole….That **unifying principle** derives from the active engagement of a human subject with the material object. In other words landscape denotes the external world mediated through subject human experience... Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world.’ (Social Formations and Symbolic Landscape, D. Cosgrove, 1998, emphasis added)

Emergent Themes

This research report reviews and provides insights into the broad themes that are emerging from the analysis of the case-study research across the participating universities. The themes are reviewed without reference to any specific case study, but begin to develop an analytical framework within which the more specific case-study reports will be situated.

Each case study will eventually be written-up in the format of a three thousand word report, forming part of the final Learning Landscapes document. A draft version of these reports will be discussed with each of the universities during May - June 2009, and an approved account shared with members of the steering committee before final publication later in the same year.

The final part of this report looks at the issues that need to be addressed in relation to designing change management tools that will enable universities to respond to the issues that are being uncovered by the research.

Leadership, Governance, Management

The research has highlighted the importance of creative and inspirational **leaders** working within each of the participating universities, at different levels, driving innovation forward. The issue of leadership is institutionalised by the ways in which the leadership role is written into the **governance** structures of the universities, enabling creativity, independent thinking and risk taking. These leadership roles are being created at very senior levels, and at various stages throughout the processes of **management** and **governance.** The **leadership** role in teaching and learning is enhanced by those in **leadership** roles having academic credibility, as well as experience elsewhere, including outside of the sector, where they have demonstrated talent and expertise in estates and the creative industries.

While strong and creative **leadership** is an important factor in promoting innovation and experimentation, it is important that ownership for an initiative is disseminated as widely as possible through the organisation. Projects dominated by the vision of particular individuals are at risk through lack of collective engagement and may be abandoned or distorted if the individual visionary leaves the university. In addition, collective engagement is important as a process of **change management** by providing an opportunity for stakeholders to be involved in the development of a project or at the very least understand the inspiration. Collective engagements are being achieved through robust systems of **project management:** the process by which institutions carry through new initiatives from inception to completion. Institutions follow a range of different project management systems, from the formal PRINCE 2, to more experience, intuitive and common-sense based project management models.

Models of **leadership** are further enhanced by the ways in which decision-making and communication is written into an institutions committee structure. Universities are complex institutions with multifaceted areas of executive and academic responsibility. The committee structures reflect this complex frame of reference, with high levels of variation between universities, ranging from collegiate, hierarchical to flat structured organisations. Nevertheless all of the universities in this study endeavour to maintain high levels of engagement and connectivity between their various organisational strategies, including teaching and learning, estates and research. The most innovative universities are those with the most devolved committee structures and the most effective systems of communication.

This complexity is further articulated through the way in which each university's **strategy** documents express their vision and aspirations, in a series of closely coordinated timescales and targets. While these strategies deal with the same issues, there is a great deal of variation in the ways in which these strategies are presented, from one page summary sheets, to much more extensive formats, and the extent to which these documents are aligned to each other.

What is striking is the extent to which structures and strategies are in a constant state of evaluation and review, in the context of multiple variants including **changing external political and economic circumstances**, technological developments, funding regimes and types of students.

Innovation

While it is important that universities have coherent and competent committee structures, it is clear from the research that **innovation** is not made in committees.

The research shows that **real innovation** is the result of a very particular set of circumstances within particular institutions. These circumstances include

creativity + ideas + funding + relationships + opportunity + support + time + unintended consequences + usage + research and evaluation.

- Creativity

Creativity, or **real** innovation is rare. The most creative examples of **innovation** are not the outcome of collaboration, but tend to be one person or a group of colleagues working together with autonomy in a relationship of high trust. High levels of consultation usually broaden the remit of a project and tend to dilute innovation.

- Ideas

Innovation is based on ideas grounded in established and developing **pedagogical principles**. The most compelling innovations are those that are re-engineering the relationship between teaching and research. These progressive re-alignments are being achieved in a sectoral context where the relationship between teaching and research is less than optimal. The most substantial innovations have **academic** and **intellectual credibility**.

- Support

An important aspect of real innovation is the **model of service** provided to support teaching and learning. Progressive models for student support have been developed within library and learning support units, including student to student support. The research has shown that while these progressive support models **underpin the success** of innovative spaces, they tend not to be included in attempts to replicate these teaching spaces in other institutions. This can result in 'surface cloning' and the space not being fully utilised by students and staff.

- Funding

Innovation for building and refurbishment relies on **appropriate levels of funding**. The case-studies reflect the various funding sources that are available to produce innovation and how levels of funding and the subsequent scrutiny attached can help or hinder innovation. These include capital funds for campus master plans, the opportunistic use of available monies, as well as

funds provided by HEFCE specifically for innovation, e.g., the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. As a result of the financial crash the sector is entering a challenging funding context. The research will need to reflect these changing circumstances and the ways in which universities can continue to create innovative learning landscapes.

- Relationships

Innovation requires very good working relationships between academics and estates professionals, including architects. The research shows that while there are real issues about negative perceptions between professions, there are examples of **very productive relationships among professions across the sector** which have produced successful innovative teaching and learning spaces. The relationship with **students are progressive** but tend to occur within formal university procedures which are not always conducive to student engagement. In addition, there appears to be a lack of informal engagements: the level at which much creative thinking and planning is done.

- Time

Space planning involves time, not just space, i.e., **space-time**. This includes the ways in which spaces are timetabled, as well as the different ways the same space is used at different parts of the year. The research shows that funded projects can be given inappropriate deadlines, **impacting negatively on project management**.

- Unintended consequences

The research shows that building innovation into teaching and learning spaces is not an altogether rational process, but has a strong element of **'intuitive planning'**, and **'muddling through'** leading to a range of unintended consequences.

- Usage

Usage of new teaching space involves not only how often the spaces are used, but **how spaces are utilised.** Teachers tend to **replicate traditional teaching methods** in spaces designed for innovative forms of teaching. The research shows the need for change management when designing a new space to overcome natural resistance to spatial and pedagogical developments, as well as providing inspiring examples of how new teaching spaces might be used and supported.

- Research and Evaluation

It is important to learn from the work that has been done through **evaluation and research**. Post Occupancy Evaluations, are being enhanced through data gathered from the **NSS, QAA statements, and other forms of scholarly research**. The research points out the need for evaluation reports to include not only the quantitative space management measures of efficiency and effectiveness, but also the more qualitative measures to assess the student and staff experiences of innovative teaching and leaning spaces.

Learning Curves:

Much has been learnt by universities in how to design innovation into their teaching and learning spaces. Yet, in spite of this steep learning curve, universities are still unsure as how to consolidate these advances, learn from each other and take matters forward.

This uncertainty is due to a number of factors, including:

- Constantly changing circumstances, making **future planning very problematic**

- **Real** innovation is rare – more **cloning** and superficial innovation than real innovation

- **Research and teaching are dysfunctional** – the core activities in HE tend to work against each other in terms of planning and development

- The current **space management** evaluation methodology is restricted to effectiveness and efficiency, there is a need to include more subjective data based on the **student experience**

- The **complexity** of each university's operational and strategic plans, in a context of many different kinds of universities, means there is a focus on complexity rather than on what distinguishes universities from other contemporary institutions. It is difficult to generalise in ways in which the sector as a whole might benefit

These issues suggests ways of moving forward which may be used as the basis for **change management tools** :

- **Scenario building and imagineering** – planning for the future of teaching and learning in HE in a complex and changing environment. These scenarios must be academically credible, extending beyond innovation to paradigm shifts.

- **Teaching space design** – offset the tendency towards surface innovation by include pedagogical principles and model of service supports as unavoidable aspects of space design.

- **Research and teaching** – real innovation is when the relationships between teaching and research are being re-engineered. Consider redesigning the relationship between

teaching and research at the levels of curriculum, prior to redesigning teaching spaces.

- **Space management** – develop space management tools that include effectiveness, efficiency and the student experience.

- **Idea of the University** - in response to the complexity of higher education, facilitate conversations about the future of the university above the strategic and operational level. This might be done by appealing to the 'unifying principle' that lies at the heart of the learning landscapes concept. A key feature of such a 'unifying principle' is that it must promote disagreement and debate. Such a debate could be structured around ' the idea of the university'.

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