

# Transformed library spaces lead to transformed library services: a case study of the RCSI library

Kate Kelly and Kathryn Smith

RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences, Dublin, Ireland

## Abstract

*A new health sciences library integrated into a state of the art academic and clinical education building provided opportunities for transforming library services delivery, positioning space as a service, deeper integration of library expertise within the University community and the curriculum, and for enhancing the student experience.*

**Key words:** libraries; libraries, medical; facility, design and construction; learning models, theoretical.

## Introduction

Founded as the national training body for surgery in Ireland, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences has been at the forefront of healthcare education since its establishment in 1784. Today it is Ireland's newest university and an innovative, international health sciences education and research institution offering education and training at undergraduate, postgraduate and professional level in Dublin and at international campuses in Asia and the Middle East. RCSI Dublin is Ireland's only stand-alone health sciences campus and the medical school is Ireland's largest.

In July 2017 RCSI opened its state of the art ten storey health sciences education building. At the heart of the building is the RCSI Library occupying three floors, levels zero to two, with advanced clinical and surgical simulation facilities above, and a five hundred-seat auditorium and sports facilities below. The building has won numerous awards, the most recent being the prestigious Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) 2019 Library Design Award, small library category (development under 2,000 square metres)<sup>1</sup>.

This article describes the design of the library, how it aligns with RCSI strategy and the impact it has on library service delivery and the institution.

## Design

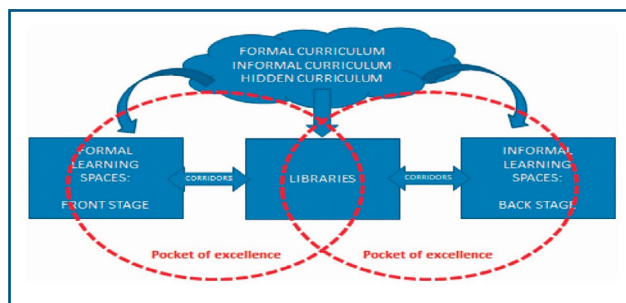
The design of the whole building was based on extensive user and stakeholder consultation. The library consultation included workshops with student representatives and academics; a "chair fair", where students tested and ranked seating prior to procurement; and the utilization of annual student survey data to inform the design. We participated on benchmarking visits to the US, UK and Europe and undertook additional library benchmarking within Ireland.

As the Information Point was a significant change it was mocked up for the library team to test height and dimensions. To help the team envisage proposed layouts the Library Learning Commons and the Staff Suite were taped out enabling team members to "walk" the spaces. In addition to desk research key conceptual influences were the "campfires, caves, and waterholes" articulated by Thornberg (1). The location of the

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sconul.ac.uk/page/library-design-awards-2019-winners>

*Address for correspondence:* Kate Kelly, RCSI University of Medicine & Health Sciences, 26 York Street, Dublin 2, Ireland.  
E-mail: [katekelly@rcsi.ie](mailto:katekelly@rcsi.ie).

library in the centre of the building reflects Norquist's (2) articulation of libraries as connectors, where formal, informal and hidden curricula intersect (*Figure 1*).



**Fig. 1.** *Libraries as connectors (2).*

Newer library design experienced on benchmarking trips influenced the sense of transparency, openness and collaboration, which redefines the boundaries of the library in the building – there are multiple entry and exit points, no library turnstiles<sup>2</sup> or book security gates and “overflow” study spaces on the upper floors. Constraints on size meant not everything was included in the final design, e.g., maker spaces, accessibility services and data visualization facilities were all considered but excluded, and the University heritage collections were out of scope from project inception as they were not considered core to the educational objectives of the building and remain in the old library building.

The design principles aimed to optimise the learning environment thereby engendering a transformative learning experience. For the library this enabled key innovations such as: the boundary-less library integrated into the centre of the building; the creation of an environment to encourage interaction and engagement; variety in spaces and seating to support individual learner preferences; a new roving service model; replacing the traditional library desk with a bespoke pod-style information point – the first academic library in Ireland to do so; the Learning Commons Expo Stage enabled the introduction of

event “pop-ups”<sup>3</sup> which have been hugely successful; and positioning space as one service among many that the library provides.

### Alignment with RCSI strategy

RCSI strategic goals include a transformational education experience, impactful research and reputation enhancement (3).

The new library provided a once in a generation move for the library team and opportunities for deeper integration within the University community and the curriculum, and for enhancing the student experience. The former library building was a stand-alone facility on the edge of the RCSI campus, out of sight of, and distant from, the centre of University activities. While functional it was uninspiring and lacked the variety of spaces to support anticipated curricula changes and the student engagement agenda. The goals for the new library were to:

- create a vibrant, state of the art learning space;
- integrate the library service within the continuum of life-long and self-directed learning supports;
- be a showcase and access point for the full range of library services;
- use space as a change agent signifying that the library is much more than just a place.

Library spaces (*Appendix 1*) reflect the University's strategic shift in health professionals' education towards team based, self-directed, life-long and inter-professional learning and also: support learner preferences for where and how they learn; facilitate engagement with, and among, the learner population; and provide ready access to information specialists and digital resources. The spaces have also played a large part in creating a new and vibrant culture of learning that has arisen through the convergence of multiple learning, study, and recreational environments in the building. They feature prominently in student recruitment campaigns and University promotional literature and together with library customer services support they actively facilitate student and public

<sup>2</sup> There are building turnstiles managed by the Estates department and connected to the Building Management System; previously the library had its own turnstiles connected to the library management system.

<sup>3</sup> Pop-up events hosted in the Learning Commons Expo Stage are temporary marketing events which pop up and after a few hours or days they pop down. The Expo Stage provides a high traffic location to attract people to events which are promoted on the Library's social media channels. A wide range of events have been hosted including; Student Union election campaigns; Student Clubs & Societies bake sales and other charity drives, cultural awareness events and membership drives; Green Campus promotions; student and staff survey promotions. The Library team uses the space for ad hoc information skills training sessions and user engagement activities.

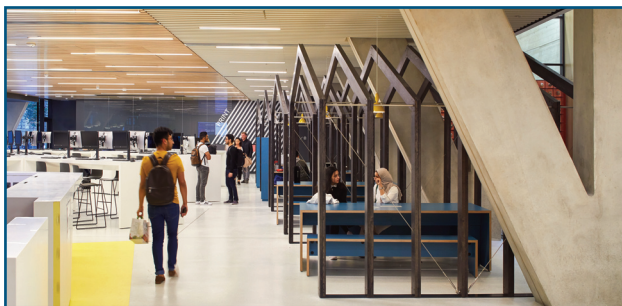
engagement activities making the library more visible and connected than at any previous time in its history.

### Service redesign and innovation

In tandem with the building project the library team underwent a restructuring resulting in six new positions and the creation of three distinct teams: Library Services Delivery; Education Research & Clinical Support; and Heritage. The Library Services Delivery team, led by the Associate Librarian for Library Services Delivery, was created in anticipation of the impact of the new building and included a new Customers Services & Communications Coordinator position and revised job descriptions for library assistants, all of whom are members of the Customer Services team.

The design and restructuring enabled significant service redesign resulting in a more active and proactive service and new collaborations and relationships including:

- new experiential and engagement spaces such as the Library Learning Commons (Figure 2), the Expo Stage, study zones (Figure 3) with supporting services contributing to a new culture of learning in RCSI;



**Fig. 2.** Entrance to the Library Learning Commons.  
Image: © Hufton+Crow/RCSI.



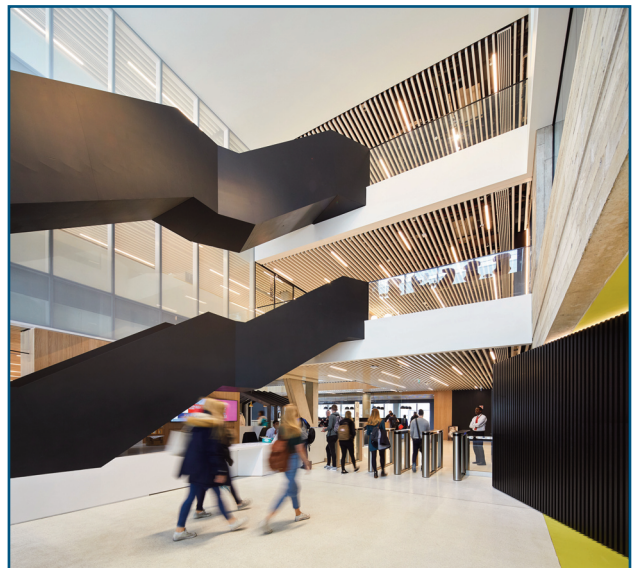
**Fig. 3.** Silent Study Zone.  
Image: © Hufton+Crow/RCSI.

- an Information Point (Figure 4) with pod service area and a roving service model, self-service circulation and a dedicated Customer Services team enhancing the customer experience;



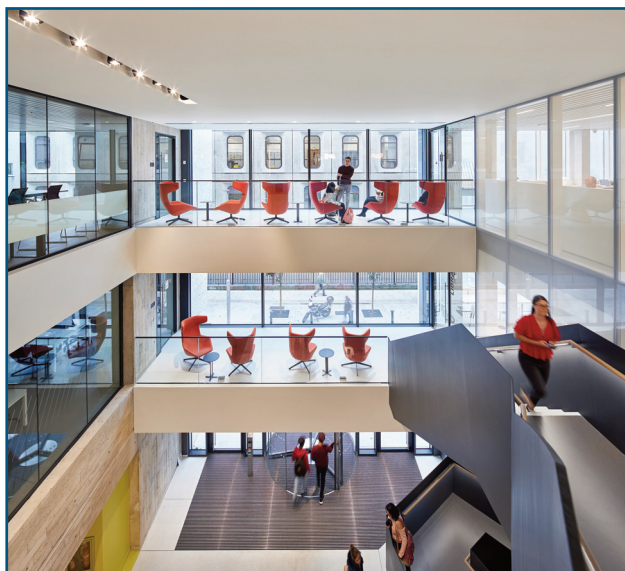
**Fig. 4.** Information Point.  
Image: © Hufton+Crow/RCSI.

- elimination of book security and turnstiles at the entrance to the library have contributed to a sense of flow and connectivity between and around the whole building and which removed all access management responsibilities from the library team (Figure 5);



**Fig. 5.** Turnstiles at entrance to the Building managed by the Estates team. Image: © Hufton+Crow/RCSI.

- an environment and ambience conducive to innovation including a wide variety of spaces and seating types; “touch down” and “break out” areas (Figure 6); ceiling to floor write on white boards in enhanced group study rooms; mobile whiteboards; magnetic notice boards for student and professional notices;



**Fig. 6.** Library Link Bridges on Levels 1 and 2 provide break out areas for library users. Image: © Hufton+Crow/RCSI.

- provision of clearly defined spaces and support services to postgraduates and surgical trainees for the first time in the library’s history;
- new operational relationships with a wider range of stakeholders to manage the impact of activities happening simultaneously in a shared building;
- digital signage used to promote library services and key messages in high impact spaces.

### Post-occupancy evaluation

Post occupancy evaluation used a variety of methods including specific questions in the end of semester student surveys run by the RCSI Quality and Enhancement Office, using user experience methodologies (UX) such as graffiti walls to capture early user feedback, and capturing user feedback at the Information Point on an ongoing basis. Arising from

these touch points we know that many of the library spaces are working really well but the volume of use of the building has been such that formal student feedback has focused almost entirely on the perceived lack of individual study seats.

To address this issue we: made layout and furniture changes to the Collaborative Study Zone to increase the number of seats and switched it from collaborative to silent mode for the majority of the academic year; actively engaged with the Students Union about student behaviours impacting on seat availability; engaged with the University Senior Management Team to agree protocols for the use of space in the overflow study areas on the non-library floors at exam time; and contracted with the RCSI Quality Process Improvement Centre (QPIC) to undertake a formal review of seat management and student behaviours. Working with QPIC and the Student Union we introduced the #FairSpaceForAll campaign<sup>4</sup> designed to address student behaviours around seat reservation by limiting the amount of time students could leave a study space unattended without risking their belonging being removed and put in a box for later collection. Feedback on these initiatives indicated they were well received and had some impact. However, despite this and almost three years later the most consistent complaint is that there is “not enough space” in the library.

### Innovation and evidence for success

That the building has met the objective of being a state of the art game changer is in no doubt, it has received significant media attention and has won numerous awards. Likewise, the Library can point to the following as evidence of being innovative for users, the University, and the library community:

- an award winning library as judged by our peers;
- significant across campus, not just student, uptake of the new services and spaces such as the Expo Stage; the Library Learning Commons; the enhanced group study rooms; the presentation practice room; self-service book circulation and the Postgraduate Suite;
- overwhelming demand for study areas to the point that the building is flexing to accommodate more study spaces earlier in the term;

<sup>4</sup> <https://rcsilibrary.blogspot.com/2019/04/fairspaceforall-new-library-seat.html>

- over 359 librarian visits from across Europe and Ireland, including several who brought architects and senior management teams to show them what innovative library spaces can look like;
- sufficient sectoral interest to hold a seminar *Why Learning Space Matters: aligning learning landscapes with health sciences curricula*<sup>5</sup> in June 2018;
- for the official opening in June 2018 the Library Learning Commons was used to host 500 guests and the Postgraduate Suite served as Green Room for Michael Bloomberg, who unveiled a plaque commemorating the event.

### Conclusion

In short the development has transformed the services we provide, how we provide them and to whom; it has also transformed operational relationships, increased the visibility and impact of the library and positioned us to serve the continuum of RCSI learners from undergraduates, to postgraduates through to continuing professional and specialist learners. Space has become an aspect of service rather than being the “library”. While the challenge of “not enough space” remains perhaps it is a good challenge to have.

### Acknowledgements

Figures 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are reproduced with the permission of the copyright holders Hufton+Crow/RCSI.

### References

1. Thornberg, D. Campfires in cyberspace: Primordial metaphors for learning in the 21st century. 2004 [cited 2020 March 27]. Available from: <http://tcpd.org/Thornburg/Handouts/Campfires.pdf> [the original link is unavailable but the document is available from: [https://homepages.dcc.ufmg.br/~angelo/webquests/metaforas\\_imagens/Campifires.pdf](https://homepages.dcc.ufmg.br/~angelo/webquests/metaforas_imagens/Campifires.pdf)]
2. Nordquist J, Sundberg K, Kitto S, Ygge J, Reeves S. Future learning environments: the advent of a “spatial turn”? *J Interprof Care*. 2013 27(S2):77-81. PMID:2393069
3. Transforming healthcare education, research and service: RCSI strategic plan 2018-22. 2018 [cited 2020 March 27]. Available from: [https://www.rcsi.ie/files/about-us/20180406042156\\_RCSI\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_2018\\_2022..pdf](https://www.rcsi.ie/files/about-us/20180406042156_RCSI_Strategic_Plan_2018_2022..pdf)

### Additional Reading

1. RCSI 26 York Street Campus Tour <https://www.rcsi.com/dublin/student-life/life-on-campus/our-campus/26-york-street>
2. Designing Libraries, RCSI Library 26 York Street. <http://www.designinglibraries.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=1498>

*Submitted on invitation.  
Accepted on 18 May 2020*

#### Appendix 1. Overview of RCSI library spaces and the learning and engagement activities they support.

Level	Space	Learning & engagement activities
0	Learning Commons Collaborative and interactive space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Engagement and exchange of ideas</li> <li>- Individual, small group and peer-to-peer learning</li> <li>- Skills development &amp; resource access via PC access</li> <li>- Print/copy/scan services</li> </ul>
0	Expo Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pop-up activities &amp; engagement in a high traffic and visible area allowing students to engage and connect with each other</li> <li>- Hosts student clubs &amp; societies, Library clinics, University units who wish to market and promote services and engagement</li> <li>- Digital screen for online exhibition promotion and informational messaging</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.conul.ie/rcsi-library-seminar-why-learning-space-matters-aligning-learning-landscapes-with-health-sciences-curricula/>

Level	Space	Learning & engagement activities
1	Reading Lounge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Books &amp; reference materials to support learning, teaching and research</li> <li>- Casual, comfy seating for reading, study spaces &amp; oculus viewing window</li> <li>- Computers facilitating access to online resources and learning tools</li> </ul>
1	Computer Room	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-directed learning and group work for students</li> <li>- Training room for all library information skills sessions &amp; can be booked by other departments delivering online training &amp; examinations</li> <li>- Access to applications and software</li> </ul>
1	Language Learning Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Language and communication skills practice and development</li> </ul>
1	Group Study Rooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Small group and peer-to-peer learning</li> <li>- Tech enabled with audio visual equipment</li> <li>- Floor to ceiling write-on walls</li> </ul>
1	Education & Research and Consult Room	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supports referrals from the Information Point to specialist information services and supports</li> </ul>
1	Information Point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Welcoming staffed customer services area</li> <li>- Query management and referral point to expert support</li> <li>- Available for student use outside of staffed service hours</li> <li>- Self-service circulation</li> </ul>
	Study Zones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Zoned to inform and influence user behaviour.</li> </ul>
2	Silent Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-directed, reflective, solitary deep learning</li> </ul>
2	Collaborative Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peer-to-peer learning and small group study</li> <li>- Moveable furniture for students to shape study spaces to suit their need</li> <li>- Converts to a silent study zone at peak times</li> </ul>
2	Postgraduate Suite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Theses write-up and self-directed study for postgraduate students</li> <li>- Group study room to support collaborative, group work</li> </ul>
2	Amphitheatre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supporting presentation practice and peer feedback</li> <li>- Technology to record and playback presentations</li> <li>- Tiered seating and lectern mirroring those in full size lecture theatres</li> </ul>
1 & 2	Concourse Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Touch down and break out spaces for groups and individuals</li> </ul>
1& 2	Link Bridges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Touch down and break out spaces for individuals</li> </ul>