

## **Future Library space: Renovations to meet client needs**

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### **Abstract:**

*The purpose of this paper is to highlight how an existing library can be transformed to meet the current and future needs of clients. In an instance where a new building is not an option, it is important to plan a comprehensive renovation project to ensure that the “new” library would be a creative and emotional place that relates to the culture and needs of the clients of the institution.*

*The paper is based on a practical project, but will refer to broader research on the requirements for future library spaces. A major focus area was to enhance accessibility and facilities for clients with special needs (evacuation, lifts, toilet facilities, access to collections and ease of movement in building) and to establish a well-equipped facility.*

*The physical work environment has a big impact on productivity, staff turnover and job satisfaction. These aspects include climate regulation, quality of light, placement of workstations, noise levels, furniture, décor, plants and art works. Studies on the impact of the physical environment on work performance informed specifications to enhance workplace areas. The specifications for workplace areas, board rooms, “pause” areas and meeting areas were finalised in collaboration with staff in this context.*

*The planning was benchmarked against world renowned renovation projects. The multi-million Rand project includes inspiring user spaces, efficient work and pause areas, interactive exhibition areas and state of the art facilities for clients with special needs. This case study will demonstrate visionary plans and solutions to current challenges in library spaces.*

**Keywords:** Library spaces, Library renovations, Library buildings

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## **Introduction**

### **University of South Africa (Unisa)**

The University of South Africa (Unisa) offers study opportunities to more than 400 000 students from South Africa, Africa and other countries. Unisa is the largest open distance learning institution in Africa and the longest standing dedicated distance education university in the world (Unisa. 2015).

Unisa was established in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope and then became the first public university in the world to teach exclusively by means of distance education in 1946. Unisa is celebrating 142 years in higher education in 2015. Unisa was the only university in South Africa enrolling student from all races for many years. This contribution to education is evident in the massive and impressive database of alumni. Rooted in South Africa and the African continent, Unisa today can truly claim to be the African university shaping futures in the service of humanity (Unisa. 2015).

Higher Education in South Africa has signalled a fundamental transformation in the sector and this has guided the university's strategies and activities. Unisa has also embraced the fact that the University needs to adapt quickly to the fast-paced changes and developments in technology. This has also generated the need for the renovation project as described in this paper (Unisa. 2015).

Unisa offers a qualifications range from short courses, certificate programmes and diplomas to three- and four-year degrees, masters and doctoral degrees. These qualifications are offered in a wide range of study choices and cover various disciplines including the engineering, humanities, law and criminal justice, business and management, agriculture and the environmental sciences, and technology. The university remains an active participant in the global conversation and experience and reaps the reward in terms of growth in academic and reputational stature, as well as insight into the capacities and capabilities as a 21st Century ODL institution (Unisa. 2015).

### **Unisa Library**

The University of South Africa's Library needs to ensure that its facilities, services and resources support the strategies and goals of the University. The library's planning and development is done within the context of the university as described above. The Unisa Library is the largest academic library in Africa and one of the best-endowed with information resources, information technology and expert staff. Since establishment, the library experienced a period of rapid growth. The resources include a printed collection of 2,8 million books, 104 000 e-books and 92 000 e-journal titles.

Within the requirements of Open Distance Learning, the library has developed various access channels to its services and resources for clients, regardless their location. Clients can borrow books from the main campus via a comprehensive postal and courier service. Unisa has ten branch libraries in South Africa, one branch library in Ethiopia and two mobile libraries serving rural areas. Based on the success of the mobile libraries, five more mobile libraries will be acquired to serve all regions in South Africa. Clients can also access the library's resources and services online via the MyUnisa Portal. Within MyUnisa, the library's

resources and services are fully integrated in the courses offered at the university. Access to the library's services and resources is also available from mobile devices.

### **Background: Unisa libraries' renovation project**

The facilities of the two libraries serving the University's Colleges (Muckleneuk Campus Library and Science Campus Library) were very dated and did not comply with the requirements of future library spaces. The Muckleneuk library was relocated to its current building in the late 1980's and for more than 30 years, only structural maintenance and a number of small renovations and changes were done. This was done in an effort to respond to the changed needs of clients and changes in technology and service requirements. However, the work was done on an ad hoc basis and the library in general did not meet the changed requirements.

The library on the Science Campus was relocated to the current building in the early 1990's with small ad hoc upgrades. In addition to the need to upgrade the library in terms of changed requirements, a major change for this library was the relocation of two Colleges of Unisa to the Science Campus.

As indicated, the Unisa library is well established and resourced. However, the facilities on both the Muckleneuk and Science Campus do not meet the needs created by the vast growth in client numbers, or the requirements in terms of changed client needs, or the rapid changes in technologies (and related requirements for the facilities). To build new library buildings were not an option and therefore a comprehensive renovation project for the two libraries was initiated.

The facilities and equipment of the Unisa branch libraries were updated recently with a major grant made available by the Department of Higher Education and was not part of the renovation project.

The paper focuses on how this project was planned within the requirements of future library spaces and benchmarked against world renowned library renovation projects.

### **Future library spaces**

There are many changes in higher education which impacts on academic libraries. A major change occurring in academic libraries is the use of space to support the library's activities and its clients. The latest development in academic (and other libraries) is the implementation of "Maker spaces". These are collaborative learning environments where clients and librarians come together to share materials, equipment and learn new skills (Turner. 2013: 226). Although not part of this paper and project, it is an example of how library spaces keep on changing and evolve.

Most literature provides an overview of the use of "information commons" or "research commons", "learning commons" or "information commons" and "learning commons" or learning spaces". The definitions and meanings are also used interchangeably in practice (Turner. 2014: 227). What is most important is that the information and learning commons

provide a common goal, namely a centralised information services and support for the research, teaching and learning needs of clients (Harland. 1022:xiii).

The library space as a teaching and learning environment has always been part of the academic library planning, but the development of the information commons has enhanced the space to include information provision and instruction as well as research and IT assistance in a more integrated way (Sullivan. 2010: 131).

The transformation of academic libraries resulted in the focus on people and learning and that library facilities should reflect the library's role as an institution of learning, culture and intellectual community and not only as a warehouse of collections. Book collections are no longer central and stacks are more concentrated (Demas. 2005:25).

Lamar (2014:26-28) states that many issues in older libraries includes poor accessibility, lack of dedicated program and training areas, insufficient working spaces, lack of reading and customer spaces. New library spaces could include individual study spaces, collaborative spaces where users can share and explore ideas, be creative and plan for change. New designs need to make users feel welcome when they enter and offer a warm feeling of a space to connect with others. The design needs to be very functional and has to incorporate the innovations such as wireless internet, self-check-out stations, self-service stations and flexible user spaces. These would include spaces for learning and making. It should provide for the current and future digital age. Environmental friendly and Occupational Health and Safety requirements should be integrated in the plans. Future library spaces should reflect the essential role of the library of giving users and opportunity to learn and be challenged by new ideas in its design and service delivery.

### **Unisa libraries' renovation project**

As indicated, the Unisa libraries on the Muckleneuk Campus and the Science Campus required a comprehensive renovation project. Key to the success of the project is flexibility, long-term planning for future technologies, changing library collections and changing user demographics / user needs. Future expansion, academic and research requirements and staff needs were integrated in the planning that was benchmarked against world renowned renovation projects. The final plans include inspiring user spaces, efficient work and pause areas, interactive exhibition areas, and state of the art facilities for clients with special needs.

At the onset of the project, a literature survey on the impact of the changing environment for academic libraries with regards to library buildings and facilities was done. The review focused on requirements for future library spaces and renovations of current library facilities. Information gathered from studies done on the impact of the physical environment on performance of staff and consultation with staff informed the specifications for the workplace areas. Information gathered focused on the workspace requirements, workflow, pause area requirements and projected growth in staff members.

Projections for the growth of collections in various formats as well as the climate and security requirements for these were integrated in the planning. General requirements in terms of Occupational Health and Safety requirements and green building requirements were integrated. The information gathered from literature was complemented with information gathered from visits to newly build and renovated academic and special libraries to benchmark the project against these.

The next step was to compile a discussion document based on the information gathered and draft specifications compiled. Consultations with library staff members, academic staff and students to discuss their requirements and integrate recommendations in the document were done. For this purpose the structure of the Senate Library Committee was used as it has representation of Students, Academics, Management and Administration. The “Advocacy and Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities (ARCSWiD) was also consulted to compile the specifications for the special section planned for clients with disabilities.

The outcomes of the research and consultations were integrated in a final detailed set of specifications and requirements for the renovations of the two libraries. This was used in the process to invite tenders from Architects for the project. Within the policies and procedures of the University, the proposal for the tender was presented to the Tender Committee and approved by top management. An information session was scheduled for interested companies. Tenders received were adjudicated by the Tender Working Committee and an Architect was appointed.

Following the appointment of the Architect a Steering Committee was established to start the planning process. Discussions and further consultations on the specifications and requirements informed the draft plans.

The following requirements were integrated in the plans. The facilities need to provide services according to the strategies of the university and should provide suitable facilities and space for clients involved in teaching and learning as well as research in these two Libraries. With regards to the space planning, building design and flexibility were key elements of the project. Planning for future technology, changing library collections, possible future expansion, changing user demographics was done. Aspects considered included user demographics, standards and guidelines, design for users, collections and staff.

With regards to the user service areas it was concluded to make provision for a research commons (specialised services, support and access for research purposes) for the different Colleges on the different levels of the building in Muckleneuk and one for the two Colleges on the Science Campus Library. The changed research behaviour as a result of radical changes with new technologies and research methods was considered. Both Libraries would have an information commons (for access to online information for assignments and preparations for exams). Various spaces for group work and individual work were designed.

The following principles were identified as key to the design of the plans:

- The project would be a complete and holistic redesign of the two Libraries and be redone as dedicated teaching and learning libraries with a focus on research.
- It would be a modern and stylish 20 year design with maximum flexibility looking into an unknowable but very different digital future.
- The libraries should have timeless and durable finishes (in relation to available annual maintenance budget) with minimum maintenance required.
- The design is based on a vision and understanding of future teaching and learning and research requirements.
- It is not a redecoration of the current libraries, but a renovation with a conceptual model of 21st Century research and library and information service (flexibility in terms of facilities, venues and furniture).

- The new Unisa Libraries are re-designed on a knowledge generation and creation model not on information resources model. This implies that the clients are central to the services.
- It provides for students and academics working in diverse collaborative ways and various options and facilities for meetings, seminars, lecture, discussions, reading should be included.
- Students' and academics' expectations for reliable, pervasive technology are provided for.

Major changes in the infrastructure included the following:

- The current entrance to the Muckleneuk Library is not central to the campus and it was completely redesigned with a central entrance on campus with easy access.
- The reception areas were remodelled and benchmarked against international standards. It will facilitate all activities in terms of general enquiries, issue of equipment, registration, self-help services, issue desks, general waiting lounge and enhanced security.
- The new facilities will be environmentally friendly in terms of all operations and adhere to all aspects of Occupational Health and Safety requirements.
- General considerations of accessibility for clients with special needs were integrated in the planning. In addition a dedicated area with state-of-the equipment was designed.
- The electrical and technology infrastructure will accommodate current and future stations, equipment and furniture. Optimal flexibility was considered.
- Information on complex building use patterns (times and requirements) was integrated in the planning.
- A variety of facilities / spaces are provided in terms of workspace, offices, information desks, self-help services, research areas, staff facilities, seminar facilities, discussion rooms and a fully equipped auditorium.

## **Conclusion**

The first phase of the project (research, consultation, plans, approval and funding) has been completed successfully. These processes took a long time due to the nature and extend of the project as well as the comprehensive consultation and approval processes. The Minister of Education has signed off on the plans and preparations for the implementation have been initiated.

The plans were informed by the information gathered on future library spaces through research, visits and consultations. The renovated libraries would comply with the changed requirements in terms of support for teaching, learning, special needs and research.

A comprehensive communication process will be launched to keep staff and clients fully informed of the progress of the implementation. Any changes in the locations of resources and/or services during the implementation will be planned and communicated carefully. The aim is to limit any inconvenience for staff and clients during this part of the project.

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