Have your university workplace cake and eat it too: Just one small catch!

Dr. Jo Dane, Educology, June 2024

There is a big elephant in the room of almost every university in Australia. The 'elephant' relates to workspace, specifically underutilisation of workspace, and more specifically underutilisation of academic workspace.

Universities have responded to a degree by gradually reducing the size of academic offices and placing all but the most senior professional staff in workstations. Over the last twenty years, typical office sizes have virtually halved from 16 – 24m2 to 9 – 12m2. However, the vast majority of academics continue to be allocated an enclosed office.

Consider the quantum of workspace on any given campus. Of three universities I have worked with recently, workspace takes up between 20 – 30% of all useable floor area (UFA) at two universities, and 40% at a third. We are talking about tens of thousands of square metres of workspace on campus, much of which is utilised less than 30%[1].

Consider the wasted energy in heating, cooling, and lighting buildings when only a handful of occupants are present? Consider the impact on sustainability targets, when most universities are ambitiously aiming to be carbon neutral and/or climate positive by 2030?

It cannot be considered acceptable that thousands of square metres of workspace sit empty every day. There are 39 universities in Australia: imagine the collective waste!

---

1. Although academic workspace is rarely audited for utilisation, a research project I was involved in found that utilisation rarely achieved 30% (Dane & Tracey, 2013). Pinder et al (2009) also reported on 30% utilisation in their research at Loughborough University. Research undertaken by Hassell (undated) found that academics are spending less time on campus now than before the pandemic.

Add to this conundrum, the reality that universities are frequently under space pressure to increase teaching, learning and research space, as faculties grow and research grants are achieved. It is incredulous to consider any university investing in new infrastructure to suffice the demands of teaching, learning and research, while thousands of square metres of workspace sit underutilised.

As far as I can tell there is one key reason why this unfathomable waste of space has perpetuated over decades: managing the reprisal from academics when they are faced with the concept of changing the workplace model.

I have witnessed the reprisal of academics; it is intimidating. Academics have been trained to seek out evidence, form indisputable arguments and perplex the uninitiated with their oral dexterity. The more senior the stakeholder, the more severe the reprisal. It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to the encounter. This is made even more difficult by the reality that there is actually very little evidence supporting the effectiveness of one type of workspace over another. I have spent the last ten years trawling through the literature and am yet to find any clear findings that would stand up to academic rigour.

Most academics will tell you they must have an enclosed office to carry out their academic duties: somewhere to carry out quiet focused work, meet with students and access their book collections. However, the disruption created by COVID19, forcing universities to close and everyone to work from home, has shown people how to effectively work from home. Academics have adapted to carrying out all the tasks they previously argued could only happen in their office on campus, from home. The challenge facing universities now is how to entice academics regularly back to campus, with the objective of enhancing workplace culture and utilisation.

But what if there was a solution that achieved everyone's objectives?

Hybrid working is here to stay. There is no putting the genie back in that bottle. In a recent workplace study at QUT[2] (2024), 85% of staff indicated they enjoy connecting with colleagues on campus. 68% said that exchanging ideas with peers is more effective in person but only 21% indicated they would increase time on campus if more people were working in their building or workspace. In other words, connecting with people on campus is beneficial, but too many people can be distracting. I found this dichotomy fascinating.

Staff expressed how much they value quiet workspace, which is often difficult to achieve on campus. The new norm of virtual meetings has increased unmet demand on small meeting rooms and quiet rooms, generating significant disruption when online meetings are conducted in open plan workspaces.

The design of campus workspace no longer appears to align with the work practices of staff on campus.

Strategic work is required to understand why staff come to campus and the types of work they prioritise on campus, with the view of developing an entirely new workplace solution.

The idea of academic staff working in unallocated workspace has been mooted – and howled down – over the years. However, a reboot of the concept would not necessarily replicate the ABW environments developed for the commercial sector (where workstations significantly outnumber offices). Yes, academic staff do need offices in which to carry out focused tasks (and professional staff by the way!).

2. 1,824 respondents

Have your university workplace cake and eat it too: Just one small catch!

A new academic workplace concept might have a high proportion of offices to workstations, the catch being they are not assigned to any one person; all workspaces are shared. Before hitting me with a tsunami of reprisals for the suggestion, please hear me out.

1. There is no denying that some terrible workspaces have been designed and built on university campuses.

I understand how people hear the words 'open plan' or 'ABW' and other synonyms and imagine a hideous call centre of high-density workstations. That type of environment would be unacceptable. It is hard to imagine a vibrant, shared work environment in which you could contemplate working productively, when you probably have never actually seen one.

Benchmark imagery and visits to exemplar workspaces need to be factored into an authentic change management process[3].

Good briefing and good design does make a difference and I believe great academic workplace design is possible to achieve.

2. This is not a one-size-fits-all solution for every faculty and division on campus.

A detailed workplace strategy needs to be activated, analysing workforce data, unique work practices and understanding why people come to campus at all. A clear design brief, generous stakeholder engagement and change management strategy will help bring all stakeholders on the journey to a new workplace model.

In addition to discussing the concept of unassigned seating there needs to be conversation on how to enable a sense of belonging among staff, manage book collections and artefacts and create a great working culture.

3. RMITs unallocated workspace at 222 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, is one university exemplar.

3. There will need to be a ratio of workstations and offices less than the number of staff.

The exact ratio would need to be modelled in consultation with stakeholders, as different faculties will demonstrate different work patterns.

Imagine coming to campus, booking an office or workstation, and getting on with your work. If you book an office: yes, you can close the door and conduct focused work; yes, you can meet privately with students or peers; yes, you can connect with colleagues. Does it really matter if your name is not on the door?

In addition to formal workspaces, there would also be access to informal workspaces such as meeting rooms, quiet rooms, staff lounge, collaboration space and perhaps a library. On the occasional day in which a high proportion of staff choose to work on campus, there should: a) be enough informal seats in the workspace to cater for high attendance; and/or b) create an overflow workspace that can be shared across faculties and divisions.

Importantly, this strategy needs to be aligned with a digital solution, enabling staff to book spaces in advance, or to find team members. This is where space optimisation can be achieved: reducing the workspace footprint on campus and freeing up surplus space for other in-demand functions.

Let's not kid ourselves: this is not easy work. However, I believe it is the only real way of achieving a well utilised, functional solution for academic workspace on campus, bringing a halt to the unsustainable, wicked waste of space and energy that is currently pervading Australian campuses.

REFERENCES

Dane, J., and Tracey, M. (2013). The Academic Workplace Research Study. Tertiary Education Management Conference. Hobart.

Educology (2024). QUT Workspace Report, Queensland University of Technology

Hassell (undated). 'People work' on campus, 'Paper work' at home: A global view of the post-pandemic academic workplace. Available at: https://www.hassellstudio.com/uploads/RP_PeopleWorkPaperWork_210901_single.pdf

Pinder, J., et al. (2009). The Case for New Academic Workspaces. Loughborough University. Available at: https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/online_resource/The_case_for_new_academic_workspace/9461057/1