

ACADEMIC WORKPLACE:

The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

Dr. Jo Dane, Educology, October 2025



INTRODUCTION

I've been diving into recent research literature on academic workspace, particularly where Activity Based Working (ABW) has been introduced. While the quantum of academic papers out there is still not extensive, there are at least some worth reading and taking note.

In this article I will outline the assumptions, findings and omissions in the literature and present some lessons learnt that may steer future development of academic workplace.

Please note this article does not specifically comment on workspace for professional staff. Many universities are well down the path of applying ABW workspace or alternative shared workspace models for professional staff, acknowledging the evolution of hybrid work practices that have developed out of the pandemic.

What is Activity Based Working, aka ABW? In a commercial sense, ABW is a model of working in an environment where staff are not assigned a workpoint, but rather, are provided access to a range of spaces designed to enable different types of work. For example, the physical workspace might include workstations, meeting rooms of various sizes, quiet rooms, ideation space, collaboration space, staff lounge and kitchen, and perhaps recreation space. Although typically, the environment would not include enclosed offices. Staff are required to book the spaces they need in advance, using digital infrastructure to support use of the workspace.

Commercial ABW strategy works on the premise that staff are almost never all at their workpoints on any given day, due to people being on leave, travelling, sick or working from an alternative location. As such the number of workstations provided is less than the number of staff. A typical commercial ABW model may target a workstation to staff ratio of 0.7, i.e. 7 workstations for every 10 staff, and aim to achieve 80% utilisation.

THE UGLY (RESEARCH FINDINGS)

First of all, the research findings into the application of ABW to academic workspace are ugly. Every research paper I have read on academic workspace has reported a scathing review of case studies that involved transitioning academics from enclosed offices to activity based working (ABW), resulting in widespread dissatisfaction and decreased utilisation^{1 2 3 4 5}.

Evaluation of the case studies appear to be based upon sound research methodologies, with a reasonable degree of independence demonstrated. Although, as this article will explain, there are consistent omissions which keep the door open for the possibility of future successful ABW academic workspaces.

ASSUMPTIONS

There are four key assumptions in the research justifying the introduction of ABW to academic workspace:

1. Save money on space
2. Increase space efficiency
3. Increase collaboration/interaction
4. Flexibility for future change requirements

Saving money and increasing space efficiency may seem disingenuous to many academics, without understanding the magnitude of workspace scope at each university and the operational costs being expended. While academics are increasingly conducting collaborative research, they do not like being told what this might look like by non-academics. Therefore, the assumptions underpinning the impetus for workspace reform has not landed well with stakeholders.

While these assumptions may be true, it is more effective to focus on meeting stakeholder needs.

NEGATIVE FINDINGS

The key issues reported in relation to implementation of ABW were^{1 2 4 6}:

- Noise complaints
- Reduced productivity
- Difficulty concentrating
- Visual distractions
- Informal conversations
- Reduced contact with students
- Security of IP
- Satisfaction
- Sense of belonging

I contend that by acknowledging these negative findings, good design can combat these issues, along with effective communication.

POSITIVE FINDINGS

Where positive results have been recorded they have focused on the following^{1 2 4 6}:

- Aesthetics
- Indoor environment quality
- Interaction with others
- Productivity (rare case)
- Knowledge sharing

PROCESS

When implementing ABW into academia, it appears designers and project managers have attempted to apply the same theory and objectives for academics as for a commercial workforce. We need to accept this is inappropriate and acknowledge the unique characteristics inherent in academic work practice. Collaboration in academia is not the same as for commercial enterprise. While there is obviously a need for meetings and brainstorming ideas, a large component of academia is individual work, requiring long periods of concentration for thinking, writing and reading.

Some research indicates that engagement with academics during design has been flawed, with designers and project managers bull-doing forward with ABW design, despite the concerns of stakeholders. There is little evidence of authentic change management process, leaving staff hostile to the idea of a new environment before experiencing it.

An effective change management process would set in place new workspace behaviours such as clean desk policy, shared libraries, scheduling meetings with students and booking spaces in advance. Adapting to new ways of working takes time, requiring effective communication and an empathetic mindset.

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THE BAD (OMISSIONS)

There are some significant omissions in the research literature:

1. Plans or images of the workspaces being researched
2. Statistical analysis on the space efficiencies gained and costs saved
3. Acknowledgement of poor utilisation of current workspace

1. Plans or images of workspace being evaluated

There are almost no images or plans of workspaces in the literature, to enable the reader to understand the characteristics of the physical environment under discussion. Is there a sea of workstations? Are workstations too small? What is the density of the workspace? What amenity has been provided for quiet work? Are noisy spaces located adjacent to quiet spaces? It is virtually impossible to empathise with the authors when it is unclear if the workspace has been designed badly or if conditions are as bad as claimed. Harrison and Cairns⁷, Pinder et al⁸ and Baldry & Barnes⁹ are notable exceptions to this and make understanding their arguments more comprehensible, albeit that their research was not addressing ABW.

2. Statistical analysis

Nooij¹ observes that the literature rarely reports on cost savings and space efficiencies as justification for implementing ABW workspace, noting “cost reduction is minimally reflected upon or calculated in the studies we found, obscuring whether it is ever realised” (p533). Therefore, it is unsurprising that academics take a cynical view to the pretext of cost savings without the statistical evidence to back it up.

Perhaps the messaging from universities to staff regarding reasons for introducing an alternative workspace model needs to change. Achieving cost savings and space efficiency doesn't carry enough weight or justification for academics. Presenting statistical data relating to sustainability and utilisation would be a good start, along with a commitment to share how operational cost savings would be reinvested.

If utilisation rarely exceeds 30%, there could be as much as 70,000m² of workspace being left unused at any one time. That unused space is equivalent to an average 35 storey building.

3. Acknowledgement of poor utilisation

This is probably the most critical omission of all. There is practically no discussion in any of the research regarding utilisation of workspace and the sector-wide phenomenon of systemic underutilisation of workspace.

In the rare instances where academic workspace occupancy has been measured, utilisation has rarely achieved more than 30% (Pinder et al⁸; Tracey & Dane¹⁰; Nooij et al¹). Post-pandemic, anecdotal observations indicate utilisation of academic workspace has decreased even further.

Workspace on campus takes up anywhere from 30 – 50% of campus useable floor area. A large university campus will likely have more than 100,000m² of academic workspace. If utilisation rarely exceeds 30%, there could be as much as 70,000m² of workspace being left unused at any one time. That unused space is equivalent to an average 35 storey building.

Every university has a serious sustainability agenda with intention to minimise consumption of energy, achieve carbon neutrality and to utilise their assets well. As reported by Arup in the latest TEFMA Benchmark Insights publication¹¹, the cost to operate space regardless of whether it is used or not, averages \$106/m² per year.

This equates to \$7.4M per year of wasted energy and operational space costs in the aforementioned example. A smaller university could easily be wasting in excess of \$1M per year on unused space.

Where is the outrage in relation to this degree of waste? How does this comply with sustainability targets? How is this acceptable in an environment of austerity measures and reduced government funding to the higher education sector?

The motivation for universities to introduce alternative workspace models on campus is not just a matter of saving a bit of money on space. It is about saving significant annual costs that could instead be reinvested in research facilities, learning spaces and other campus amenity.

I am not suggesting that it is appropriate to reduce all workspace on campus by 70%. The point is that assigning an office or workstation to every academic on campus is simply unsustainable. Universities must do more to reduce waste of space on campus, with workspace being an obvious target.

The research literature ignores any discussion on utilisation of workspace, casting the notion of ‘saving money on space’ as an inconvenient excuse to unnecessarily disrupt academics on campus.

THE GOOD (LESSONS LEARNT)

Do the findings in the research literature determine that ABW is never going to work for academics?

No, I don't think so.

Should ABW for academic workspace be implemented in the same way as commercial ABW?

No, definitely not.

The research literature identifies several flaws in the process of implementing ABW³:

- Poor stakeholder engagement; having a predetermined outcome; not genuinely listening to stakeholders
- Failure to adequately support academic work practices
- Failure to address workplace culture with topics such as a sense of belonging, academic identity, privacy and confidentiality
- Lack of effective change management process
- Poor communication

Every single one of these issues relates to engagement with stakeholders.

Understanding and acknowledging academic work practice is fundamental to accomplishing ABW workspace success. Academics comment constantly on the need for an enclosed office, for enduring, concentrative activities. Therefore, offices must surely be considered one of the various workspaces in the ABW playbook, the catch being that academics would not own the office and would need to book an office in advance to access.

Deep discussions will need to take place to establish best strategy for managing book collections and student consultation. The location of book collections needs to be scrutinised in light of where academics conduct most of their research. Some staff will consistently conduct research from other spaces such as laboratories or from home, whereas others will consistently use an office on campus. A deep strategic interrogation of work practices will likely yield an understanding of what types of activities are undertaken in the campus workspace and with what frequency.

The lessons learnt identified in the research provide clear pointers as to how universities may positively adapt their approach to developing academic workspace. Change management is a crucial part of this process, beginning well before the design team is brought on board. Listening, sharing and problem-solving are all critical elements of the stakeholder engagement process.

There are no short cuts.

CONCLUSION

While research literature reporting on the implementation of ABW workspace for academics has demonstrated widespread discontent, the research fails to emphatically make the case that ABW is inherently unsuitable for academics. The omissions in the research create serious oversight and potential bias. Researchers must share plans, images and explanation of the design in question in order to argue inappropriate design outcomes.

Underutilisation is one of the most serious issues confronting university facility managers – 30% occupancy of workspace is simply unacceptable and must be addressed. The literature highlights serious flaws regarding academic stakeholder engagement, translating as lessons learnt that can be harnessed to inform better engagement and design processes in future.

To quote Brene Brown, *"you can choose courage, or you can choose comfort, but you cannot choose both"* (p23).

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There are no short cuts.**

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