

University managements need to get beyond economies of scale

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During the past 20 years, Australian universities have made consistent attempts to reduce the amount of space allocated to academic offices. In many cases the large offices enjoyed by senior academics in the past have been reduced to half their size. This trend is continuing as many universities consider the introduction of open plan or even “activity-based workplaces”. In ABW workspaces, almost no one has an allocated office or even a workstation.

Most initiatives of this type end up in a pitched battle between the facilities department (as a proxy for senior university managers) and academics. Typically, the university managers pretend to be uninterested in the cost implications (while secretly being very concerned) and academics pretend that academic work can be done only in a locked office, preferably with the blinds down (while secretly doing a lot of their work in cafes, on or off campus).

Sadly, a lot of effort is being wasted because the amount of money at stake is not large and the key effect of this policy has been to encourage academics to spend less time on campus.

For any place-based university, this is a disaster because it undermines one of the key purposes of having a campus in the first place: to provide a congenial place where academics and students can interact with each other. For the average Australian university, the campus is a billion-dollar-plus investment, so preserving its effectiveness is important. Also, we know one of the things that students want most is to interact with academics.

After many years of bruising encounters on this issue, I think it is important to ask a fundamental question: Do “contemporary workspaces” for academics actually deliver value to

universities? In other words, is the pain of introducing a contemporary workspace for academics worth the gain? More fundamentally, is there a gain?

To do this, we need to understand why open plan and ABW are being considered. Most commercial organisations with large numbers of employees long ago adopted open plan or ABW. The key driver for this has been to lower costs: reducing the area of rented space, reducing the cost of fitting it out and lowering the cost of operation. A phalanx of consultants with a vested interest in fostering change supports this process from the sidelines, making claims for the productivity gains offered by the “contemporary workspace”, all backed by various types of “research”. Much of this research is laughably poor. To be fair, much of the research supporting “traditional” office layouts is equally poor.

For many commercial organisations such as banks and insurance companies, minimising their office space makes good sense. Rental and fit-out costs are substantial in relation to the cost of paying staff wages, and if a staff member doesn't fit in with open-plan culture, they can be sacked or never hired. Most commercial workers already have become used to working in open-plan offices and their productivity appears unaffected either way. Some professions, including journalists, architects and engineers, have worked in open-plan offices for many years and appear none the worse for it. The claims for a productivity boost may be overstated but the cost reductions are real.

Nevertheless, a university is quite unlike a bank or a firm of architects. Typically, a research--active Australian campus will use only about 15 per cent of its space for academic offices. As universities rely increasingly on casual academics, the proportion of academic office space on campus may be declining.

The cost of space on campus is dominated by research facilities, followed at some distance by large-scale teaching venues. Although only about 15 per cent by area of a campus is used for - research, laboratory space can cost up to 10 times more than office space to construct (and, in some cases, to run). Large-scale teaching venues and libraries are three to five times more expensive than offices to construct. At most Australian universities, the cost of providing academic office accommodation in relation to the cost of employing academics is a very small number.

Why, then, is there such a focus on academic office space? The answer is in three parts.

Measuring the productivity and output of research facilities is a notoriously complex and difficult problem as many universities significantly over or under-provide research space.

Similarly, effective management of a teaching suite is complex. Some Australian universities operate their teaching suites very efficiently but many others don't, in some cases providing more than twice as many teaching seats as they need.

On the other hand, it is fairly easy to produce space guidelines for offices, particularly if you take the view that "less is more".

This is not to say that the impulse to manage academic space is wrong but we do need keep the debate in context. Just as the sector has learned the benefits of creating a sticky campus for students, we need to remember to create one for academics as well.

ARINA studies show that academics tend to spend less than 26 per cent of the working week in their offices because the academics are teaching, attending meetings, working in laboratories, in the field, at conferences and so on. We need to remember that economic efficiency is just one of the criteria to consider when assessing the provision of space. If it were the only criterion, we'd never build a council chamber, an analytical facility, a graduation venue or a sports field again, for instance. The real question to ask is how facilities can best enable the university to reach its objectives.

Academics may be irrationally resistant to open-plan or activity-based working practices but we need to concede that these are deeply held beliefs that are cultural and industrial in nature. Trying to force academics to adopt workspace models they don't understand or want is doubly fruitless because it is unlikely to produce any significant financial gain.

If both sides of this debate understand the basic issues, it may be that we can deliver a more congenial academic workspace that will encourage academics to spend more time on campus and still have sustainable financial outcomes.

A future academic workspace is unlikely to consist of long double-loaded corridors with lots of doors, but equally it will not be ABW. Also, if universities continue to increase the use of casual academics, we should consider ways of engaging them in the campus academic community beyond sending them the odd email.

And if we really want to improve capital allocation at universities, the place to start is with research.

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