

Symposium seeks to define social space, plan and adapt

Social space in higher education establishments came under scrutiny at a symposium organised by Sodexo Education. **Nick Turrell** reports.

'Absolutely transformational in terms of student experience'



Geoff Pringle

States directors, consultants and Sodexo executives wrestled with the topic of social space in universities and concluded a lot more work needs to be done to get it right.

Sodexo Commercial Education managing director Paul Anstey said the round table discussion at Sodexo's London head office had been "hugely informative" as part of the quality of life journey the company is on.

He said it was good to share thoughts and best practice, as well as having the opportunity to get together and network, and what had been learned from the third such

symposium would be fed into the process of trying to improve the student experience.

Sodexo Education managing director Jane Bristow outlined four main questions to frame the discussion: what is meant by social space, how can we determine what is required, how is social space costed, and how can success be measured.

Delegates were able to see a different scale approach adopted by universities in other parts of the world, such as Australia, the United States and Singapore.

While multi-million pound investment in modern facilities is happening in the UK, the economics of the sector mean much change has to be about remodelling existing buildings and spaces, and there were plenty of examples of how this is being achieved.

The symposium heard that in some circumstances fairly small changes can have a big impact such as providing bright, quality, modular furniture that students can easily drag into formations of their choice. Taking down dark walls and gloomy corridors and opening things up with glass is also proving a popular approach.

The meeting heard from Frances Stone, residential and commercial services director at the University of Leicester and chair of CUBO (College and University Business Officers), who shared her experiences of what had been done at Leicester and also some of the more expansive schemes she had seen in Australia.

"I do believe we have to respect our customers, and that's what we are trying to achieve," said Frances. "We think it is important to provide them with something that is of quality that they aspire to."

Frances demonstrated that improvements weren't necessarily about investing in new buildings and showed examples of how breathing new life into underused or redundant properties could deliver positive results.

Frances couldn't foresee UK-based institutions being able to invest in their estates in the way that is evident in the United States and Australia so she predicted it would be



Frances Stone

more about making creative use of existing facilities.

She said universities had to get to grips with young people's desire to share everything. "It is very on trend at the moment", she said. "People can't help but share their whole lives, on Twitter and Facebook, and these group activities are so important we have to provide the space for them. That's the world we live in."

"It might be a time of change; of uncertainty; but that makes it exciting."

Geoff Pringle, chief operating officer of the University of Exeter, said because of its geographical location extra effort had to be made to create a desirable destination and in 2012 it had opened The Forum, a £52m investment that had been "absolutely transformational in terms of student experience".

The inspirational mix of outside and inside space includes a new Student Services Centre, refurbished library, retail and catering outlets and technology-rich learning spaces.

The development had helped to put Exeter into the top 10 Russell Group league of universities, said Geoff, which it probably would not have attained without it. The Forum is light, bright and airy offering good social learning space, with good quality furniture and "absolutely superb" wifi, which the symposium acknowledged is a top influence when students are choosing their university.

"It has given the university a heart," said Geoff. "We had a great hall and a library before but The Forum is the place where all are students want to be. It is at the centre of everything we do."



'Sharing is very on trend at the moment'

Catering consultant Charles Manners, director of Turpin Smale, said universities are developing student hubs with aligned catering that are proving very popular and interior design and the counter displays are a key part of the experience.

Good quality coffee and tea is at the heart of the offer and brands such as Costa, Illy and Starbucks and specialist coffee brands help to reinforce the quality offer. Food quality and displays are crucial because they will sell mid-morning, lunchtime and mid-afternoon.

Cafés are still a growth sector and sales in the past year are 11 per cent up so in universities they can be profitable and provide contemporary learning and social space.

Charles said one of the most popular design changes is queue-busting serveries - where the introduction of more tills cuts down on queuing. "Add more tills, take more cash, get happier customers, it's as simple as that," he said.

Delegates had differing views on the extent to which services should be provided to accommodate the different hours students keep. Charles said operators are now embracing more flexible opening times (see Costa story): some education places have 24-hour opening at certain times of the year but not over Easter or the summer, for example.

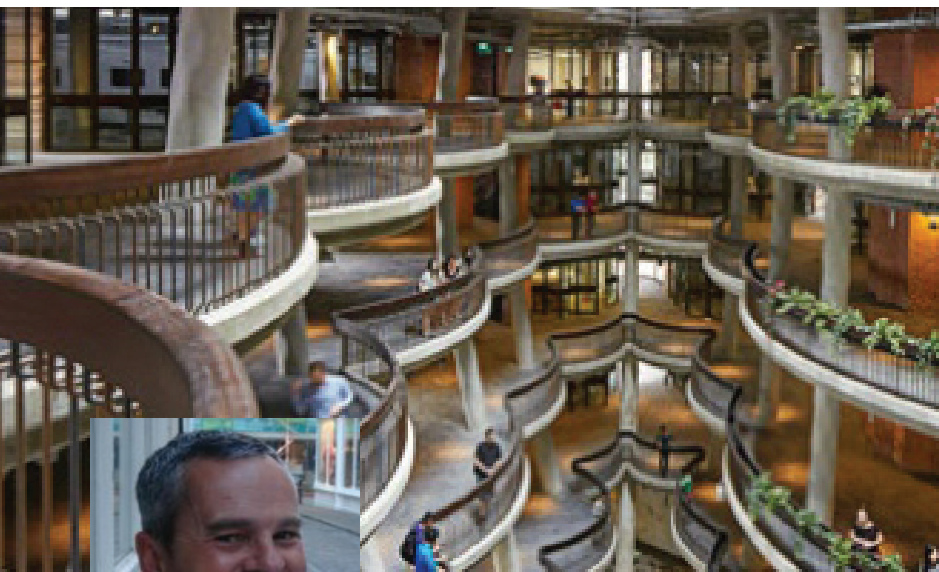
"Ultimately catering has to shut down from a cost point of view and vending has to take over," he pointed out.

Stephen Wells, director of estates at Queen Mary University London, said it was not uncommon to have up to 900 students using the university library between 3am



Charles Manners

'Add more tills, take more cash, get happier customers'



Miles Berkley

and 4am but Frances Stone questioned whether from a wellbeing and resilience point of view such a culture should be encouraged. "We don't want students to be up through the night studying."

Design consultancy Dolphinblue has taken a research-based approach to social space planning and

director Miles Berkley talked about the complexities and diverse needs that have to be accommodated, for instance youngsters wanting to sit together even when they are working individually.

And to prove that students view social space differently, Miles said he had worked at a university where the estates officers believed there were only seven social spaces on the campus and yet a group of anthropology students asked the same question came up with 43.

He showed what a futuristic approach might look like with the example of Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, first among the world's best young universities, which he had visited. There social learning has been put at the core of the learning process and students are taught in 360° rooms, trees abound and tapered tiers overhang each of the floors below.

Sodexo Education strategic director, Peter Taylor said it was evident from the discussion that there was little research available about social space and he invited delegates to get together as a working party to develop thoughts on the topic further. He also said they would ask the Sodexo Quality of Life Institute to look at the subject in more depth.

He also said the UK business would reach out to colleagues in other parts of the world to draw on their experiences in planning social space.



Through the night

Sodexo trialled 24-hour opening at the 'Proud to Serve Costa' coffee shop at Brunel University as students crammed in end of semester studies round the clock.

Outlet manager, Janet Howarth said the trial was an unprecedented success with students studying in the university's library.

"We've had phenomenal feedback from our students and staff. It's been incredibly successful, but more importantly our students have really benefited from the outlet. Having a Costa available throughout the night really enhances the student experience."

Neil Whittle, Sodexo's contract director at Brunel University, explained: "We originally started the trial with Sunday openings, which were incredibly successful. Consequently we decided to have the Costa outlet running 24 hours every day for students finishing their dissertation or cramming for exams. They can wander down to the outlet during their study break, grab a coffee and go back to work."

The Sodexo team used social media and flyers to



Supervisor Martin Collier (left) and coffee shop assistant Tony Ellis operated Sodexo's Costa outlet at Brunel for 24 hours during exam time.

promote the trial, in addition to special promotions.

Neil hopes its success continues into the next academic year, because it adds to the service the students receive at the university.

"Our proposal to the client is that we could offer this 24 hour opening during term time, regardless of it being an exam period. This way if students wanted to grab a cup of coffee they can, no matter the time of day - or night."

