Opening of Learning Commons – JS Gericke Library: 16 February 2011

Ellen R. Tise (Senior Director, Library and Information Services)

I would like to start this presentation off with a quote by M. Remy (2004: p5) that describes the broader mission of a learning commons space as"...not merely to integrate technology, reference and services but to facilitate learning by whatever means works best." This, in essence, is what the Library and Information Service strives to achieve with the creation of its new Learning Commons.

The Learning Commons, a unique space with its fresh, vibrant look and feel, is not merely a place where students are able to access computers, online resources or reference services. Its design and services have been directly informed by and based upon pertinent trends and developments within higher education. It is also borne out of innovative thinking around new learning and collaborative spaces within academic libraries worldwide.

Changing face of the academic library:

Firstly, the learning commons space itself reflects the changing world of academic libraries where Librarians take cognizance of their clients' preference for online, scholarly materials. Academic libraries are less-focused on building mammoth print collections and are applying their expertise in developing academically sound collections of online journals, databases, eBooks and discovery tools that will improve and enhance their client's learning experience. To cater for this digital learning environment the LC has over 116 computer workstations available for accessing our comprehensive online collection, several plug-in lap top workstations and wireless technology. Learning and communication technologies are prevalent throughout the space, adding to the stimulating and high-tech feel of the area.

Student-centred learning:

The model of **student-centred learning** is inherent within the conceptualisation and design of the Learning Commons. This kind of learning focuses on locating the student within the centre of the learning process where they are proactively involved in acquiring knowledge and gaining skills. This kind of learning encourages the development of independent learners who are able to successfully navigate their studies and research. The idea with student-centred learning is to inculcate, within the student, a set of transferable skills that they may use throughout their lives in order to successfully participate and engage within society. The following tenets of student-centred learning have informed the design, layout and services of the LC:

Computer-assisted learning:

The technology-rich area fits with the increasing use of web-based courseware and e-learning tools within the higher education environment. Students are expected to proactively obtain information, submit work and conduct online tests via learning portals such as WebStudies. This is supplemented by the availability of a myriad of online journals, ebooks, bibliographic management and discovery tools available to assist students throughout their learning and research activities.

Collaborative learning:

With student-centred learning students are encouraged to engage with their peers and collaborative learning is encouraged. Students engage online via their elearning portals, email and via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition to facilitating online collaboration with the provision of ample technology within the LC space, the LC houses discussion rooms where students are able to conduct group project work, create collaborative presentations and conduct group discussions to facilitate the learning process.

Skills development:

With the emphasis on developing information literacy skills for successful learning and research the Learning Commons has an impressive 48-seat, hands-on e-classroom to support the Library's Information Literacy Programme. Since the Learning Commons opened its doors on 24 Jan 2011 forty-eight successful training sessions have taken place in the e-classroom with over 800 students attending these workshops. Training and workshops to be conducted during the year will include academic literacy, IT literacy, information literacy and the use of bibliographic management tools such as RefWorks.

Non-traditional learning space:

Student-centred learning veers away from the traditional 'spoon-feeding' concept of learning. It encourages non-traditional and flexible methods that keep students engaged, interested and stimulated. This is mirrored in the fresh vibrancy of the Learning Commons, the flexible work areas, open spaces and variations of seating available.

Diverse ways of learning

The Learning Commons design and services strongly take into account the diverse ways in which students find information, learn and produce their work. In addition to the mix of collaborative and more private areas, the Learning Commons offers a good balance of facilities for independent work as well as personal assistance from highly skilled, expert information services staff who are able to assist students with their searches, research and project work.

A strong customer service approach lies at the heart of the service offered within the Learning Commons and within the larger Library environment. This is strikingly reflected in the prominent service desk located in the centre of the Learning Commons. Permanent staff and Student Assistants are available at the desk to assist with information provision, research assistance and technology support.

Essentially the space offers a creative, productive area where students are able to develop academic literacy skills that will prepare them for success at the University and beyond. The architectural style of the Commons is based on Smartie Box design elements, as indicated in your programme notes. This inspired the Library to adopt the motto "Be a SMART Matie", to enhance and freshen the Library's overall brand and to evoke the image of the non-traditional library.

Already the statistics and feedback shows how the space has been utilized and welcomed by students. Within the first three weeks (since 31 January) we had over 19 800 students walking through the door.

Some of the comments on the University Facebook:

"I LOVE it", "Very very Impressive", "Great Design and brand new PCs!" and "It's really luxurious, love the colour schemes, computers very quick...you just feel lekke when you are there". Clearly the innovative design and services have the desired effect – to encourage fresh thinking, innovative learning and engagement.

Research Commons and Master Plan

The opening of the Learning Commons earmarks the completion of the Library's Hope Project aimed at improving "Access to Electronic Resources: Student Success and Support for Research" as an essential building block for promoting democracy and human rights. Following close in its wake however is another flagship of the Library – the Research Commons, which opens in March. The Research Commons is aimed exclusively at masters and doctoral students and staff, offering high level research support, such as professional information services, consultation and collaboration opportunities, workshops and presentations and research discourse activities.

Of course we could not stop there – we have clearly raised expectations now - so the library has embarked on an overall, broader 'Master plan' to reinvigorate the library and its surrounds. The idea is to reaffirm the library as the symbolic heart of the campus - through design, the use of space and new technologies. This will involve, amongst other things:

Enhancing accessibility

This will include Electronic reading room for accessing eBooks and other online materials. Adding new discussion spaces and platforms, laptop stations and relaxed seating

Enhancing communication

Upgrading the auditorium, seminar/skype rooms and additional photocopy stations

Enhancing the learning experience

Interactive exhibition and coffee socializing spaces, freshening the library with new study spaces filled with natural lighting and landscaped areas

Rethinking interior spaces

Re-energising and refurbishing the front entrance of the library entrance, reconfiguring the circulation area and reference sections

Revitalising the external area of the JS Gericke Library

Using green spaces, landscape art and design to make better use of the external and atrium areas for increased student engagement and activities within this area