

## Event Title: Reference Visit

Event Date: 5th of March 2020

Location: University of Northampton



### Introduction

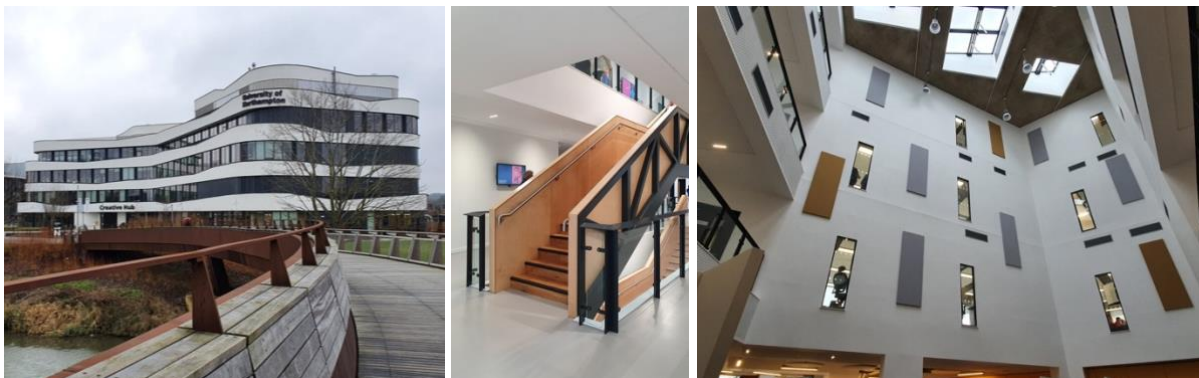
If history had been different, there might have been three ancient universities in England – the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Northampton. Northampton was once an important royal town and a University was established in 1261, making it the 3<sup>rd</sup> university in England and the 22<sup>nd</sup> in Europe. Alas, the academic staff in the university sided against the King in the Siege of Northampton, part of the Second Barons' War between 1264 and 1267, Henry III was advised that the university was a threat to the University of Oxford and, in 1265, the King not only dissolved the university, but issued a decree banning the establishment of a university in Northampton, which was only overturned in 2005 when the Privy Council agreed that University College Northampton could achieve university status and become the new University of Northampton.

An amalgamation of several different institutions, the new University inherited an estate that was spread across Northampton, of indifferent quality and not suited to the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education institution. It therefore took the bold decision to create a new campus on a brownfield site alongside the River Nene, adjacent to the town centre yet large enough for the university to create its own identity with facilities appropriate for a new 21<sup>st</sup> century campus, while also providing an opportunity to provide a public connection between the centre of the town and further areas at the other side of the campus including Delapre Park and Abbey. Thus the campus could become an integral part of the town and the entrepreneurial future of Northampton.

With a budget of £330 million, the project was not without its challenges, including land contaminated by previous industrial activities, major city utilities crossing the site and the need for major infrastructure including new bridges to the town centre, but it offered the University the change to rethink the way that it would deliver teaching and use space in the new campus, with a space brief which would be 40% less in area than that in its previous old buildings.

Murdoch Cameron from MCW Architects and Becky Bradshaw, Director of Estates and Campus Services at the University explained the academic and design background to this unique project, followed by a tour around the key buildings.

The major academic change was to rethink the organisational structure and move radically from devolved, self-contained departments which 'owned' space, resulting in duplication of facilities and barriers to cross-departmental collaboration, to shared space focused on three key hubs – the Learning Hub containing teaching, learning and study space, along with student services, the Creative Hub housing specialist facilities, for example for nursing, engineering and art, and the Senate which contains the Research and Enterprise Hub and the ceremonial spaces.



*Creative Hub*

Space reduction was mostly achieved in the specialist spaces, sometimes previously designated as such because of one piece of equipment which was rarely used, any many such spaces were incorporated in the general teaching spaces in the future brief. Study space was protected, and academic offices moved away from departmental and cellular divisions to open flexible ways of working, located in three floors of the Learning Hub. At the same time, the academic structure was reorganised into three faculties.



*Learning Hub*

Not everything was moved onto campus – the University decided the best place for the student nightclub was in the town centre, while Student Union support facilities make good use of a refurbished old engine shed on campus, a good link to the past. There is a further new building in the town, an Innovation Centre opened in 2018, immediately adjacent to Northampton railway station.



*Engine shed*

### **Reorganising the Teaching and Learning**

To achieve the transformation of the learning landscape and provide a campus in which there are no formal lecture theatres for teaching, the strategy of the University was for small interactive group sessions enhanced by the latest technology, with the largest rooms being for 80 people and a focus on a personalised learning experience that enabled opportunities for students to develop and grow. In advance of designing the new building, the entire portfolio of courses at the university was reviewed and changed.

### **Reorganising Staff Accommodation**

Academic staff are now housed in three floors of modern flexible working space embedded in the Learning Hub, closed to the students. Their floors have the best views out across the campus and are designed with separate student interaction/meeting spaces near to the students, but allowing privacy in the staff areas, a separation which was also planned into the University of Coventry's recent Computing and Mathematics Building.

### **Communications**

Communications was key to the success of this transformational project, starting well in advance of the planned opening, with different staff workstreams led by HR, the Learning & Teaching team and the IT team with a policy of consulting staff where appropriate, developing policies for the new environment, providing clear guidance and support documents for management, along with training and development. A dedicated communications manager was appointed a year in advance of the move, along with departmental 'move champions' and a dedicated email site for information and

Q&A. Other changes related to car parking – the new campus is ‘car-free’ so transport plans and city bus routes had to be revised.

A prototype was erected on the old campus for staff and students to visit and experience, along with Open Day tours of the new buildings. The university has to work hard with overseas students who still have a cultural view that coming to university means sitting in lecture theatres.

### **Lessons Learnt – academic offices**

A recent staff survey on the academic offices has been positive. Staff felt that the office environment with its great views, engaged them with the outside. They reported enhanced communications and networking, improved relationships across disciplines, while support and junior staff reporting that it helped them build confidence. Access to refreshments was appreciated and there was an overall feeling of enhanced well-being.

Negatives were lack of dedicated staff social spaces, lack of communication (surprisingly) and the catering offer and prices (which has been revised - see below)

### **Lessons Learnt – overall project**

What lessons has the university learnt from over a year of occupying the campus that could inform other similar projects?

- Catering: The catering consultants employed by the university over-estimated the amount of catering required and the price point was too high, especially as it is relatively easy to take a short break and walk into the town centre. The catering offer has been reduced in space and price to reflect the proximity to the town and the fact that many students come from comparatively low-income families. The catering outlets also now have microwaves to enable students to bring their own food.
- Security: The original design philosophy was to keep the campus relatively open on the ground floors, to reflect the university’s role in the town community. The Manchester Arena attack meant that this had to be revised. There are still large areas open to the public, but there is now greater access control beyond that;
- Teaching room sizes: The buildings are planned mostly around 80-person and 30-person rooms. Experience has shown a demand for smaller rooms for around 4 or 5 persons.
- Sports Facilities: The original plans included a partnership to use the facilities provided by a local leisure trust, but students are demanding their own facilities on campus, something the University will take a view on in the future;
- Student residences: The University retained 900 existing beds on old own campus, but demand for these has dropped substantially even though transport is provided, again something the university will review in the future.
- Staff: The university recognised that the new working environment and new ways of learning and teaching would not suit everyone and there had always been a concern that staff would react by moving elsewhere. The University allowed a 3-year planning horizon to enable staff to make that decision carefully, but in reality only 1 to 2% of staff left.
- The Research community now has its own space, and research quality has gone up. Student satisfaction in the last NSS Survey had gone down as expected because those students had been disrupted by the move (as also happened at Ravensbourne University London in Greenwich), but it is now expected to go up.

### **Questions**

In answer to questions from HEDQF Members, Murdoch and Becky advised that the new teaching style had not required additional staff though, as student numbers grow, it may be necessary to extend the teaching day from the current 8am until 6pm to 8am until 8pm with some weekend teaching. This

had always been anticipated as part of the original planning and consultations. There is a working etiquette in silent zones within the staff offices, which staff respect.

Procurement involved an overall Principal Contractor, Bowmer & Kirkland, with different contractors and design teams for infrastructure and for the different buildings.

### **Conclusion**

The University of Northampton is to be congratulated on the achievement of its new campus along the waterside which, as the planting grows and becomes established, will settle into the landscape. There was a real buzz about the place, with students obviously reacting positively to the new environment, and it was good to see public art included in the external spaces.

This strongly-led, bold project, with its transformational academic change, works for Northampton with its slim management structure; it may not work for other universities. Every university is different. The cost of £2,100m<sup>2</sup> for the Learning Hub - excluding landscaping and infrastructure - for the quality achieved is impressive.

Many thanks to Becky Bradshaw, Murdoch Cameron and those from the University of Northampton Estates and Campus Services who facilitated the visit.

### **Post-Visit Comment**

The visit was made shortly before the UK went into a near-lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic with universities, colleges and schools closed, maintaining their learning and teaching by digital methods, while academic and administrative staff normally attached to their offices were taking part in the largest experiment of remote working the country has ever known.

University finances will inevitably take quite a hit when things return to 'normal' after the current crisis is over. One of the questions for the future must therefore be how much of the experience of different ways of working and delivering learning, teaching and examination assessments in the current crisis will continue into the future. In this context what the University of Northampton has achieved could provide useful prototypes for the sector in general.

Ian Caldwell

March 2020.