



The Research Commons: a new creature in the library?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the use made of the Research Commons during its first year of operation in an attempt to establish whether it actually provides a genuinely new and different service from the point of view of the end-users, and whether a facility such as this could indeed be presumed to support research and enhance research output at the university.

Design/methodology/approach – Using Lippincott's assessment grid, an attempt was made to assess activities in the Research Commons according to the dimensions of extensiveness, efficiency, effectiveness, service quality and usefulness. Methodology was mixed, with quantitative and qualitative components that logged the extent and nature of the use of the various facilities in the Research Commons and sought to establish from stakeholder perceptions whether the services on offer are regarded as substantially different from those in the undergraduate Knowledge Commons and whether they are indeed seen to be supporting research activities.

Findings – It was found that a combination of numerical and qualitative measurements has yielded sufficient evidence for the drawing of preliminary conclusions. The evidence gathered demonstrates that the Research Commons, designed primarily as a site for the creation of new knowledge in the form of original writing by researchers at postgraduate and academic level, is indeed an advance on the well-established "library commons" concept, and that its creation represents an instance of "parallel invention" – the "new creature" that the title refers to.

Originality/value – This paper provides a multifaceted perspective on the activities taking place in a new library facility and should provide librarians and researchers with evidence-based insight into how meaningful research support may be provided to young researchers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds as part of an academic library service in a middle income country.

Keywords Academic libraries, Assessment, Information facilities, Research libraries, South Africa

Paper type Case study



Introduction

Spaces are themselves agents for change. Changed spaces will change practice (JISC, 2007a).

In September 2008, a new, access-controlled facility called the "Research Commons" opened in a carefully-designed space on an upper floor of the main library at South Africa's University of Cape Town. The Research Commons, which is open only to postgraduates (in US terminology, graduate students) and academic staff (in US terminology, faculty), is equipped with state-of-the-art computer workstations, printing and copying facilities, individual study carrels and sound-proofed group seminar rooms, as well as a lounge area, a small reference collection, some current periodicals of general interest, and tea and coffee. It is permanently staffed by two reference specialists.

The library had already been operating a highly successful “Knowledge Commons” (primarily for undergraduates) since 2001 (De Jager, 2004). The new Research Commons is part of an integrated consortial project generously funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Although superficially similar to the Knowledge Commons, it is a much more sophisticated space where library staff can offer specialised support in both specific subject domains and research skills, especially to the university’s growing number of postgraduate students, many from underprivileged backgrounds. Such a service had earlier been unambiguously identified as a need by respondents to the library’s 2005 LibQUAL+ survey (see below). This paper describes our attempt to develop appropriate evaluation standards for the new facility, based on criteria identified by Lippincott (2006).

The information commons and diffusion of innovation

The idea of the academic library “commons” – variously called the information commons, the knowledge commons or even the learning commons – originated in the 1990s, mainly in universities across the USA, as the physical manifestation of an integrated digital service environment. It had become technically possible to offer a wide range of information sources – not just metadata but full-text services as well – through a single library interface. Library managers began to organise floor space, and even entire buildings, around clusters of workstations at which users could access the new integrated services, and where appropriately-trained staff members could offer support when needed.

In a seminal early paper, Beagle identifies several key characteristics of the commons as physical space. These include a “general information and referral desk, which functions as first point of contact and general help center”, and a “coordinated and extended set of study and workspaces offering an array of options ranging from traditional individual study to collaborative conference areas” (Beagle, 1999).

Although many case studies of individual implementations of the commons are available (e.g. JISC, 2007b; Oblinger, 2006a), virtually no attention has been paid to the question of diffusion versus parallel invention. In other words, it is not entirely clear whether the commons was conceptualised in one place and then copied in others (diffusion of innovation), or whether multiple institutions, faced with similar or identical problems, came up with similar or identical solutions independently (parallel invention) (Rogers, 2003). This is important because depending on the extent to which an innovation is diffused, the more likely it is that some kind of invariant model will have been adopted (Weyland, 2005). In circumstances where parallel invention has taken place, the more likely it is that local, idiographic features will appear.

Rogers identifies four components in the diffusion process. The first is obviously the innovation itself, which – and this is an important point – only needs to be perceived as new by its adopters. It does not matter whether the innovation is objectively a new discovery. Innovation is often (but not always) technological in character. The second component is a channel of communication: in the case of US academic libraries, such channels might consist of conferences such as this one, the professional literature, and information-sharing through consortial arrangements, for example. The third element – often ignored or deemed unimportant in social science research – is time, which allows us to trace the pattern of adoption along an S-shaped curve (Rogers, 2003). Such a curve typically represents a process that, over time, starts slowly with early adopters

of the innovation, accelerates rapidly as it becomes widely popular, and finally slows down again as it reaches the natural limit of potential innovators.

The fourth component is what Rogers calls a “social system”, which he defines as “interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving”. Clearly the community of academic libraries (in the USA, at least) is sufficiently homogeneous to constitute such a system. But it may be that the degree of heterogeneity between US libraries as a group and academic libraries in, for example, South Africa is an important variable in the application of normative evaluation standards across countries. Such factors as geographical proximity, language, and levels of technological development and competence can all come into play as determinants of success. Rogers clearly identifies this as a potential problem.

Most scholars appear to agree that the library commons spread by diffusion, but they have not explored the issue. In Halbert’s narrative, for example, the commons emerged in “many major academic libraries” at around the same time, a circumstance that leads him to characterise the trend as “spontaneous” (Halbert, 1999). Tucker is also implicitly a diffusionist, writing of a “significant movement [that was] sweeping across the country (Tucker, 2007). Wong, moreover, believes that most such facilities are implementations of the same, diffused idea:

Libraries in different parts of the world have been implementing the service model in a wide range of scale with encouraging outcomes. The name of the service may vary *but the core service ideals remain essentially the same* (Wong, 2009, emphasis added).

It seems likely that diffusion of innovation has played an important part in the adoption of the commons as a way of delivering service, especially to undergraduate populations. However, parallel invention, or something very similar, may be occurring in some places, as the idea is adapted for researchers and postgraduates. Nevertheless, the channel of communication (Rogers’ second component in his diffusion model) is presently wide open:

The Web is now the best place to find practical information on library information commons. Numerous academic libraries have posted a wide variety of materials about information commons there. It is easy to find proposals, mission statements, planning documents, workstation configuration information, architectural designs, staffing patterns, and staff training plans (Cowgill *et al.*, 2001).

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has been running a Knowledge Commons for undergraduates for eight years, based, as we freely acknowledge, “on the “information commons” concept fairly common in the USA today and first encountered at [...] the University of Southern California” (De Jager, 2004). We have monitoring evidence that postgraduates have been using this facility alongside undergraduates, but more importantly we also have strong evidence of demand for a library service focused on research support. In 2006, therefore, when the Universities of Cape Town, KwaZulu-Natal and the Witwaters-rand submitted a funding proposal to the Carnegie Corporation, the Research Commons was one of three major components in the project design at all three institutions (Research Libraries Consortium, 2006). The other components, which form an integrated whole, are a web-based, customisable research portal, and an intensive residential programme of advanced training for selected mid-career subject librarians, followed by extended working visits to leading US research libraries. All these elements were designed to enhance library support for research.

We believe that the “Research Commons” idea may be an innovation, the “new creature” of our title, and one that can be distinguished, theoretically at least, from the widely known undergraduate commons. In the literature, the distinction is made by Roberts, who uses the ambiguous term “learning commons” while arguing that:

[...] learning commons are spaces with the technology and design that *emphasise knowledge creation*. The learning commons is the next phase of providing interactive research tools for students, faculty, librarians and staff. In the learning commons model, the library becomes *a laboratory, a space for knowledge creation* (Roberts, 2007, emphasis added).

For the purposes of this paper, we use the expression research commons to refer to a physical space offering a differentiated service, i.e. a service that is offered only to a subset of users, seeking to achieve specific purposes through library use, by staff who have been specially trained and who have no other duties.

The questions that we pose in this paper, therefore, address two separate problems. First, is the distinction between a “learning space” and a “knowledge-creation space” a significant one? Roberts does not offer definitions of what she intends these terms to signify, but in our understanding the undergraduate commons is a space designed primarily for the gathering of information, i.e. online reading, typically to satisfy the requirements of course assignments, while the postgraduate commons is intended for the production of knowledge, i.e. writing, typically the drafting of original research papers or theses. Second, how can we evaluate the ways in which this new space satisfies the identified demand for research support, and also how it might “change practice” for researchers?

South Africa’s research problem and the role of library support

Academic research in South Africa currently faces serious challenges. It was in decline from the 1990s until recently, despite having been identified by government as a critically important source of the innovation upon which economic growth and development depend. In 2005, a study showed that although South African research output was stable from 1987 to 2000, its share as a proportion of world output dropped from 0.7 per cent to under 0.5 per cent. This illusory “steady state” in the scientific output of public science [...] “is typical of *a system which has reached its limits*” (Department of Science and Technology, 2005, emphasis added).

The size of the public-sector research and development workforce declined by around 40 per cent between 1990 and 2001 (Department of Science and Technology, 2005). However, more recently, with government support, there has been some improvement in the performance and output of, as well as expenditure on, the South African national research enterprise (Department of Science and Technology, 2008). In 2006-2007, for example, South Africa increased research expenditure overall by 9 per cent compared to the previous year (Christie, 2008). A significant part of the problem is demographic: current research depends to a considerable extent on a group of ageing white males who are approaching retirement. In 2002, nearly half of South African research output was published by investigators over 50 years old. Age is not the only problem: it is also clear that “no significant shift towards more representative demographic production has occurred” in this area. Black people and women are not entering the academy in numbers that are proportional to their representation in the population at large (Department of Science and Technology, 2005).

Another factor affecting the research landscape in South Africa, in sharp contrast to the situation in North America and Europe, is the significant proportion of academic librarians who do not have master's level qualifications in librarianship. Nor do they have significant, formal subject background or research experience. Of course, many of these colleagues have acquired considerable on-the-job experience and know-how; nevertheless, broadly speaking, South African library schools are not educating academic librarians who will be able to provide effective, high-quality service to emerging researchers who themselves may also be under-prepared. While we do not believe that improving library support for research can itself improve levels of performance, it is likely to be a necessary, even if an insufficient, condition for such an improvement.

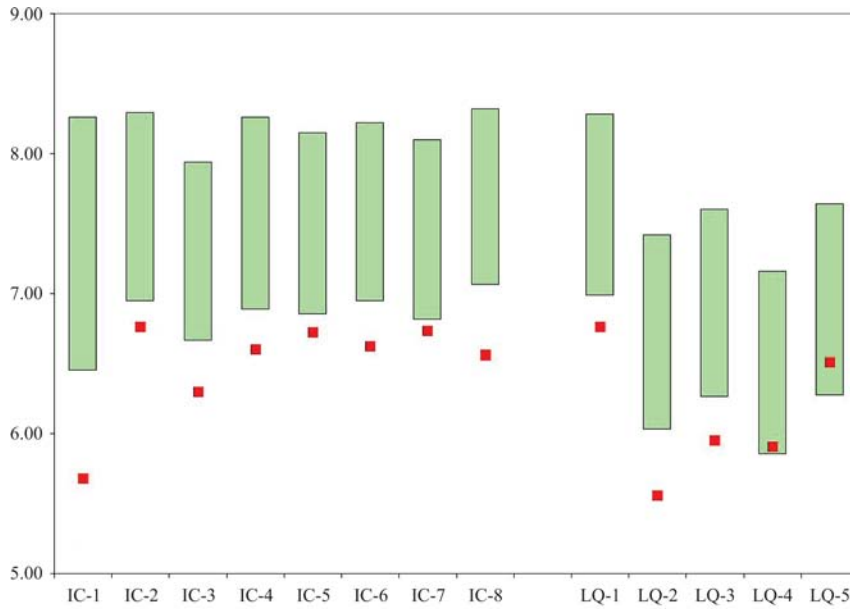
We believed intuitively that UCT's library users needed support not only in specific domains of knowledge, but also in mastering the research process. This intuition required corroboration, which emerged from the results of the LibQUAL+ survey that UCT carried out in 2005. The LibQUAL+ instrument is specifically designed to reveal which library services users want most, and importantly, the extent to which the library is providing those services. The instrument assumes that indicators rating the quality of a service, by themselves, tell us less about the value of that service to a particular group of people, than such indicators do when they are combined with indicators rating the importance of the service. In other words, a high-quality but unimportant service may be less valuable than an indifferent service that is nonetheless vital to researchers. Some things matter more to respondents than others, and the library must therefore make an effort to provide those things.

The LibQUAL+ instrument uses three standard categories – “Affect of Service” or AS; “Information Control” or IC; and “Library as Place” or LP. There is also a customisable category, which we dubbed “Local Questions” or LQ, with questions that may be selected from a pre-prepared list up to a maximum of five. In the UCT survey, five research-oriented questions were chosen as Local Questions. In the discussion that follows, we concentrate on the results obtained in the two categories Information Control (IC) and Local Questions (LQ), which deal with research and subject support.

The responses demonstrated first, that researchers (postgraduates and academic staff) valued research support most highly, and second, that the library was not meeting even the minimum requirement in this area. In identifying the service aspects that they valued most highly, researchers as a group made similar choices, but academic staff valued some specific services more highly than postgraduates. A similar result, that academic staff seemed to have “higher minimum expectations and desired scores” had been observed earlier by Lessin in the context of the USA (Lessin, 2004).

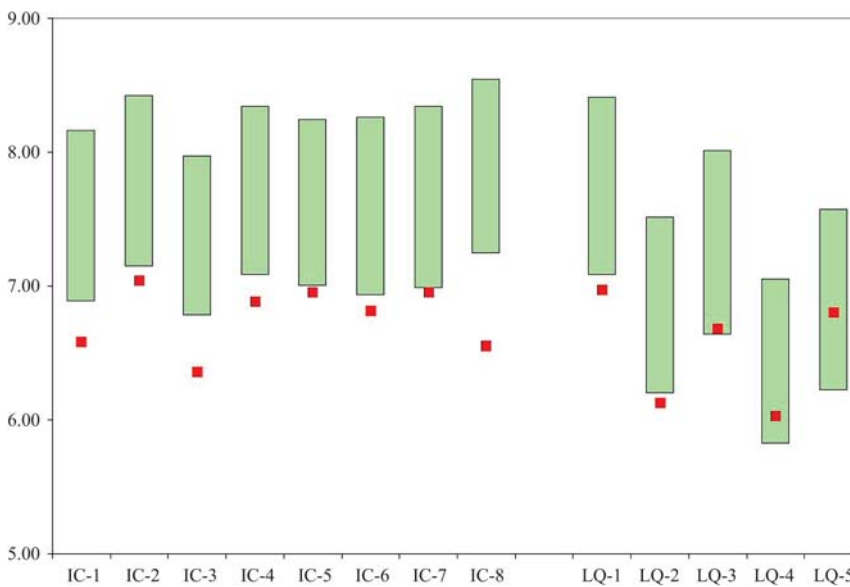
What was most worrying about these data was the fact that the library fared worst in precisely those areas that researchers valued most highly. The responses from academic staff revealed actual gaps between the minimally-acceptable and the actually-perceived levels of service for ten out of 13 areas in the IC and LQ categories. Significantly, both academic staff and postgraduates also assigned lower-than-minimum ratings to “using the library for research” (LQ-1) and “availability of subject specialist assistance” (LQ-2).

Figures 1 and 2 represent the dramatic gap between the minimally-acceptable and the actually-perceived service levels, in the first case for postgraduates, and in the



Notes: Top of bar = desired level of service; bottom of bar = minimum level of service; small square = perceived service performance

Figure 1. Responses to IC and LQ questions by UCT postgraduate students, 2005



Notes: Top of bar = desired level of service; bottom of bar = minimum level of service; small square = perceived service performance

Figure 2. Responses to IC and LQ questions by UCT academic staff, 2005

second case for academic staff. We emphasise again that there is an actual gap in these key areas of library support for research – in other words, the level of service provided was actually lower than the acceptable minimum, not just at the bottom end of the notional scale.

Respondents' comments reinforced our interpretation of the data from the IC and LQ question sets. For example, one postgraduate student in the humanities wrote that the library actually favoured undergraduates: "[my] main complaint is about the noise levels and the prioritisation of undergraduate users over the postgraduate and staff users". Another postgraduate wrote that the library provided a:

[...] poor environment for quiet study and research [...] because of] the sheer numbers of undergraduate students flooding onto campus each year [...] The Library during the undergraduate semester vacations is an excellent place for learning [...]

We interpreted these and other similar comments as clear appeals for differentiated services in a space reserved for research activity.

The Research Commons within the consortium and at UCT

Once the decision to respond to this situation by building a Research Commons (as well as improving staff skills and introducing an integrated Web portal) had been taken, the whole project was submitted in 2006 to the Carnegie Corporation. The Commons would be organised to provide "in-depth assistance to a few researchers at a time" rather than a broad general service. It would offer an environment designed to support intensive study and research, and would be, in the words of the proposal, "a haven" that would help to "satisfy higher-level client needs" (Research Libraries Consortium, 2006). South African academic libraries, as the proposal pointed out, have always been designed to offer a single service to all users: the Research Commons therefore represented a significant break with tradition.

The Commons was designed to offer its users "a dedicated space with carousels or configurable tables equipped with modern computers linked to the Internet and to printing facilities" (Research Libraries Consortium, 2006, p. 36). Considerable attention was paid to detail in design; as Frischer has pointed out, in an "inspirational" library space users can experience the "drama of community" – something that "cannot be had in the office or home" (Frischer, 2005). In the planning stage, the deputy director of the library held focus group sessions and individual interviews with researchers to find out exactly what kind of space and services they wanted. We were keenly aware that the space needed to be "flexible and networked, bringing together formal and informal activities in a seamless environment [...] design is a process, not a product" (Oblinger, 2006b)

Both hardware and software were to be as sophisticated and up-to-date as possible, with absolute priority within the library in terms of back-up and maintenance. After some consideration of possible staffing models, it was decided that dedicated, permanent research support staff would be posted in the Commons from the start.

At this point, we had been unable to find any description in the literature of an attempt to achieve what we wanted to do. Indeed, we learned anecdotally that the idea of the "Graduate Library" as a separate space seemed to have fallen out of favour in the USA and elsewhere, and in that sense, although for what we consider good reasons, we were swimming against the tide. The concept of the Research Commons as a space for

researchers was therefore, as far as we were concerned, an example of parallel invention. Subsequently, we discovered that colleagues at Sichuan University in China had experienced something similar, and had reached conclusions that seemed to us to endorse our general approach to the problem:

The information commons of research university libraries should be a brand new service platform dominated by brand new service concept. It is a physical presence that integrates network, computer hardware facilities and information available in multiple formats [...] an open, free, beautiful, convenient, comfortable, flexible and functional place where users can self-study, group discuss, creative work, interactive communicate, and relaxing socialise [*sic.*] (Yao *et al.*, 2009).

There was nonetheless an element of risk, in the sense that while we knew that there was a demand for a differentiated service from postgraduates and academics, our response was, at that time, untested. Another Chinese academic institution, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, again paralleled our experiences:

[...] when the pilot phase was launched, the concept of a commons in the Library was still rather fresh [...] library staff knew little about how users would respond to it and what complexities and challenges lay ahead (Wong, 2009).

Evaluating the UCT Research Commons

This paper explores the use made of the Research Commons, as described, during its first year of operation. We are seeking to establish whether it actually provides a genuinely new and different service from the point of view of the end-users, and whether a facility such as this could indeed be presumed to support research and, importantly in the South African context, enhance research output at the university.

In attempting an early evaluation of the impact of the Research Commons, we have adopted a slightly modified version of the assessment grid developed by Lippincott in 2006. This model proposes that activities be assessed according to five “dimensions”, namely, extensiveness (a quantitative measure), efficiency (a financial measure), effectiveness (a measure of innovation), service quality and usefulness (Lippincott, 2006). We have added a sixth measure, equity, to this list as a particularly relevant and important concept in the post-apartheid South African academic environment. Any library service in South Africa needs actively to take into account the demographic, cultural and linguistic diversity of the South African population, as well as the highly inequitable access to education that characterised our recent past and that continues, despite best efforts, into our present. Table I summarises the adaptations that we have made to the Lippincott model.

Extensiveness

Extensiveness can be expressed in numerical terms. Out of a defined population targeted by the service, how many members of the population have access to it, and how many members of the population actually make use of it. We have registered 5,961 postgraduates (defined as masters’ and doctoral candidates) for access to the Research Commons through their magnetic university identity cards. The capacity of the Research Commons is at present very limited, as Table II shows, with a total of 44 seats.

Ever since the Commons opened, there has been a steady and high rate of occupancy of these seats. Occupancy rates are monitored hourly, and in term-time, the

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Extensiveness | How many researchers are using the commons? |
| Efficiency | Do specially-designed environments justify their costs? |
| Effectiveness | What is available in the Research Commons that cannot be found elsewhere? |
| Service quality | Do researchers receive the support that they need? |
| Usefulness | What is the extent of use? What are the occupancy rates? Is there a demand for extended hours or an expanded facility? |
| Equity | Is the service available and accessible to, as well as used by researchers regardless of background? |

Table I.
What to assess about the
Research Commons

Source: Adapted from Lippincott (2006, p. 253)

Table II.
Seating spaces in the
Research Commons

| | No. of seats |
|--------------------|--------------|
| Silent study area | 12 |
| Central study area | 18 |
| Lounge area | 8 |
| Seminar room | 6 |
| Total | 44 |

facility is more or less full soon after it opens at 09:00. Seating can be claimed only on a first-come, first-served basis and cannot be reserved in advance. Seats can be occupied without a time limit during the course of the day, and seats can be vacated for periods up to 15 minutes, or longer by special arrangement, without forfeit.

Another measure is the number of visits. Clearly, on any given day, the number of individual visits may be higher than the maximum occupancy, as one researcher leaves and another takes the seat. We analysed individual visits on nine representative sample days through the first semester of 2009 (16 February-12 June). The numbers of individuals who visited the Research Commons are shown in Table III.

Efficiency

There is no doubt that the Research Commons was more expensive to build and install than its undergraduate equivalent, and is more expensive to run, although less expensive

Table III.
Individual visitors to the
Research Commons on
sample days,
February-June 2009

| | No. of visitors |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Thursday, 19 February | 56 |
| Friday, 20 March | 64 |
| Tuesday, 31 March | 73 |
| Tuesday, 14 April | 78 |
| Saturday, 2 May | 29 |
| Monday, 11 May | 80 |
| Wednesday, 20 May | 88 |
| Wednesday, 27 May | 79 |
| Thursday, 25 June (vacation period) | 44 |

to staff, as it is much smaller: the Knowledge Commons has 101 seats compared to the 44 in the Research Commons. The Knowledge Commons has four permanent staff and 30 part-time student navigators. In both environments, the quality of furnishing and decoration – the “finishes” – and the space allocated to each workstation have contributed to costs that are significantly higher than other student computer laboratories on campus. A postgraduate working in the Research Commons has nearly double the space that an undergraduate has at a table in the main library (see Table IV).

Feedback from the focus group (see below) has confirmed that the signal sent to postgraduate students by providing high quality finishes is that the university respects and values their contribution and sees them as responsible adults. The popularity of both the undergraduate Knowledge Commons and the postgraduate Research Commons indicates that the idea that space can determine practice and behaviour is not fanciful.

Effectiveness and service quality: the focus group process

We followed Lippincott’s suggestion that a focus group be used to gather evidence on the use of the facility, and how it may have “enabled [researchers] to better achieve [...] academic objectives” (Lippincott, 2006). The method was used to assess the dimensions of effectiveness and service quality already defined and noted above.

William Daniels, a member of the Research Commons staff and one of the authors of this paper, assisted in inviting researchers who work in the Commons on a regular basis, and would be prepared to discuss their experiences and provide informed opinions in a 90-minute focus group session. We ensured that the group was diverse academically (by level as well as discipline) and demographically (by race, gender, language, and national origin). The group that participated was made up of 13 people, and the session was facilitated by the other two authors (Darch and de Jager). Daniels did not attend for ethical reasons, to allow participants to speak freely, and to ensure confidentiality. The session was digitally recorded in MP3 format using an Edirol R-09 device and then enhanced using the open source software Audacity; the recording and a partial transcript have been used only by Darch and de Jager.

Participants were seated around a long table. Four main topics were identified at the outset. These addressed:

- (1) use (what do you do in the Research Commons?);
- (2) effectiveness (what is available in the Research Commons that you cannot find elsewhere?);
- (3) service (can the staff help you as much as you need?); and
- (4) likes and dislikes.

| | Seating space | |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Research Commons | 5.7 m ² or 61.35 ft ² | Table IV. Seating space per user compared in differentiated services and the main library |
| Knowledge Commons | 4.4 m ² or 47.36 ft ² | |
| Main Library | 3.1 m ² or 33.37 ft ² | |

It was agreed that each topic would be discussed until it was exhausted. The conversation was lively, and went on for the full 90 minutes with little prompting. The facilitators ensured that all participants had full opportunities to contribute and to be heard.

Our primary supposition had been that use was likely to reflect what Roberts has called the “next phase” in the development of the learning commons model, with a primary focus on knowledge creation rather than information acquisition (Roberts, 2007). Our first question to the group was designed to find out what they actually do in the Commons, in order to establish whether it was working well as a site where knowledge creation can take place. Respondents commented that the Research Commons was a “serious academic space” where they were able to work productively. Activities that were specifically mentioned included writing papers and theses, “doing research” and consulting with librarians. There was strong and recurring emphasis on the importance of the quality of the space itself (quiet, high quality equipment, good connectivity, comfortable furnishings) and on the sense of community that the space had engendered (Bickford and Wright, 2006).

In South African universities, postgraduate study is typically a solitary activity, since graduate seminars are infrequent, there are no US-style comprehensive examinations, supervision is not by committee, and even a master’s degree can be obtained by thesis alone. The importance of working in a place where others were working too was mentioned repeatedly, as was the ability to network and share ideas with others over a cup of coffee without having to leave or sacrifice one’s seat at one of the workstations.

In order to explore the effectiveness of the Research Commons, the group was asked to consider in what ways they thought it was different from the rest of the library, or from other postgraduate study spaces on campus, or from the Knowledge Commons, if they had worked there before. The respondents made it clear that they regarded the Research Commons as significantly different – and indeed preferable – to anywhere else on campus. They repeated that the Research Commons was a “better space”: quieter, more comfortable, with better temperature control, soundproofing, lighting, and bigger desks. They thought that the quality of the furnishings showed that the university respected researchers; in turn, the space was generally respected by its users as a dedicated working space. Some had even nicknamed it “the office”. Its multi-functional, sound-proofed consulting and seminar rooms provided the best facilities for small-group work with internet connectivity on campus. Participants liked and used the small, carefully selected collection of writing guides and reference materials on research methodology, many of which they had not encountered before.

In order to collect data on Lippincott’s dominion of “Service Quality”, participants were asked whether the librarians in the Research Commons were able to offer significant assistance with the kind of work individuals were doing. The responses were enthusiastic and affirmative. The two members of staff were described as competent, confident and very responsive to user needs. They offered expert assistance and on-the-spot training with database searches and citation software, knew “where to find answers” and could help with technical and software problems. The group particularly noted that the two members of staff “were always there”, that they remembered names and faces and were so interested in what researchers were doing in the Research Commons that they sometimes offered readings or made helpful suggestions on their own initiative. When the focus group was specifically asked whether the Research Commons staff could or did help them with the actual

conceptualising or drafting of papers – for example, with abstracts or proposals – the consensus was that this was not the kind of support that was expected from librarians. One person specifically noted assistance in paraphrasing a particularly difficult text, but the group agreed that they would not normally look to Research Commons staff for domain expertise. The librarians could and often did refer researchers to experts.

At the end of the focus group session, the participants were asked to consider what they liked best and least about the Research Commons and what if anything they would like to have changed. The main issue that emerged concerned longer opening hours, and almost for the first time there was some difference of opinion. While everybody agreed that longer hours were desirable, some were concerned that if more staff members had to be deployed, and the Research Commons were to be used more intensively, positive characteristics might be lost through wear and tear.

Similarly, the fact that the Research Commons was often full and seats were unavailable soon after opening at 09:00 did not create unanimous support for enlarging the facility. The group liked the small, close community feel, and believed the two members of staff would not be able to cope as effectively with a larger facility. However, some participants acknowledged that “squeezing in” additional laptop workspaces might be acceptable. There were some calls for access to more software packages, even if they were not supported by UCT’s IT services, and for more journals and newspapers to add to the small collection that was already available.

The focus group evaluation provided preliminary but substantial evidence that the Research Commons is an effective and highly valued service on campus. It provides solid support for activities that – according to participant accounts – constitute knowledge creation rather than information acquisition. It has, however, been in operation for too short a period to be able to tell whether this new form of library support will actually translate into an increase in research output. Indeed, even if such an increase were to be noted in future, we do not yet have the tools to discriminate between the multiple variables that might have contributed to such an improvement. We shall, however, be able to use comparative data from the upcoming LibQUAL+ survey, to be held in September 2009, to determine whether researchers’ perceptions of levels of support have shifted.

In addition, the nature of the support provided may differ from the kind of support that was originally envisaged. The LibQual + survey had emphasised that library staff are lacking in domain knowledge and the Research Commons was conceptualised on the premise that library staff members who serve researchers need to have a high level of subject expertise (Baseline Snapshot, 2007). While it was acknowledged in the focus group that the members of the Research Commons staff are not themselves researchers or domain experts, their familiarity with information sources, services and technology, together with access to an informal network of available subject specialists, enable them to provide an effective, high quality service from the point of view of its frequent users. This may also be a question of users’ low expectations, and may change over time as expectations rise.

Usefulness

Evidence relating to extent of use, occupancy rates and demonstrated demand for expanding the facility can be used to show that the Research Commons is regarded as useful by users. Data from gate access records for the Research Commons were

scrutinised to determine how many individuals had visited during 23 consecutive work days (from 20 April-16 May 2009). Duplicate visits on a single day were discounted, so the same person was counted only once per day (Figure 3).

Figure 3 shows that a total of 303 different people visited the Research Commons during the sample period. Of those, 97 came once only, while a total of 107 came on five or more days. This provides objective evidence for the existence of a developing community of researchers, a phenomenon clearly articulated in the responses of focus group members.

Equity

The facility is accessible to physically disabled persons via an elevator (lift). At least one visually-impaired researcher is known to use the Research Commons because she is able to adjust the size of fonts on the large workstation displays there easily.

Although we have not kept formal statistics on the race and gender of users, sensitive issues in South Africa as elsewhere, observation and emphatic consensus from focus group participants confirm that the demographic profile of the user community is extremely diverse.

The Research Commons has ten notebook computers available for loan to postgraduate students, many of whom cannot afford to purchase their own laptops, and who come from environments where access to a workstation, let alone the internet, is a rarity.

Conclusion

In endeavouring to identify appropriate standards by which to evaluate the Research Commons, we have found that a combination of numerical and qualitative measurements has yielded sufficient evidence for the drawing of preliminary conclusions. We believe the evidence we have gathered demonstrates that the Research Commons, designed primarily as a site for the creation of new knowledge in the

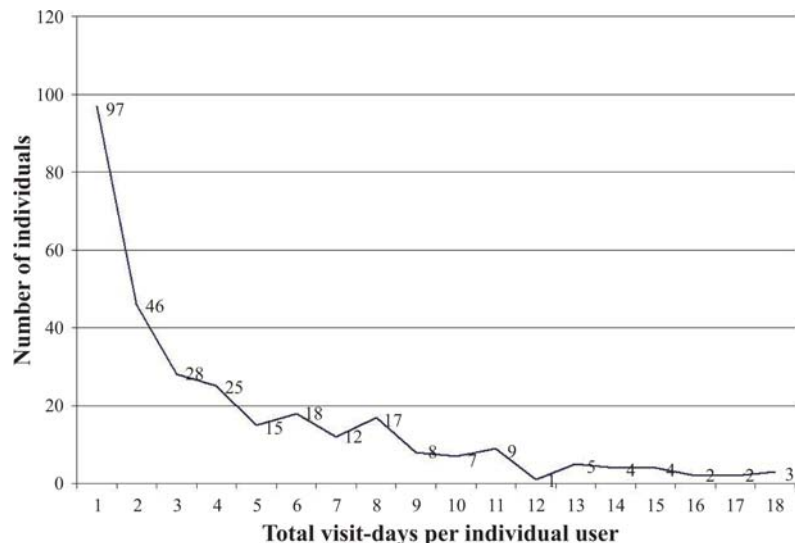


Figure 3.
The long tail: visitor-visit frequency, 20 April-16 May 2009 (23 working days)

form of original writing by researchers at postgraduate and academic level, is indeed an advance on the well-established “library commons” concept, and that its creation represents an instance of “parallel invention” – the “new creature” that our title refers to.

Although the Research Commons, because of its size, can only accommodate a very small subset of its potential users, evidence shows that the service is nevertheless well used and well liked by researchers. However, it is unclear at this stage whether the success of the Research Commons would be reproducible in an expanded form or in further iterations, or if, on the contrary, its current popularity depends on specific, local qualities of form and function that would be hard to duplicate elsewhere.

It is too early to determine if the creation of the Research Commons has had any impact on the productivity of researchers at our university. We can only repeat that while we do not believe that improving library support for research can itself improve levels of performance, we do find it likely to be a necessary, even if insufficient, condition for such improvement. What certainly will be measurable, however, is the level of library support our researchers believe themselves to enjoy; we are eager to see what effect the existence of the Research Commons has on these perceptions, as reflected in the results of the upcoming September 2009 LibQUAL+ survey.

Finally, we set ourselves the task of examining ways in which the Research Commons might “change practice” for postgraduate students. Here, the most interesting and encouraging findings in this study have led us to conclude that the Research Commons, in attracting a core group of regular or frequent users, has, in fact, contributed to the building of a friendly and supportive community of postgraduate researchers in the academic environment.

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