

Rethinking Learning

A new sixth form Learning Centre puts the library at the heart of college life by challenging traditional ways of thinking and ways of working

by David Lindley

A complete new rebuild of Aquinas College, a Catholic sixth form college in Stockport, provided the opportunity to rethink the role of the library and learning centre. 'Our vision,' says Fid Bleasdale, Learning Resources Manager, 'was to think differently, to forget how we have always done things and take an entirely fresh look at how we wanted to shape students' learning and support outside of the classroom.'

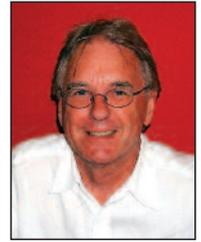
That vision came to fruition in the creation of a Learning Centre over three floors to support the information, research, learning and teaching needs of the college community. It brings together complementary learning, support, advice and guidance services under one roof. The library service, learning support, IT technical and support services, counsellor and careers advisor all operate out of the shared space.

Since the majority of the college's 1,900 students go on to university, the ambition was to create a space that on a micro scale would present them with the experience of an HE library, moving through different floors, finding specific services and

support, different types of study spaces. Along with the introduction of RFID and self-issue, the inviting environment and the innovative design concept will help students develop their independent learning skills in a facility that is more like a business centre than a traditional library.

Green for go

The design concept was developed by FG Library Products, incorporating the college's original vision for a flexible space over three colour-themed floors, where students can move between the informal and more formal learning and study spaces. It works like a traffic light system. The ground floor, the green floor, has a relaxed and informal feel, with the main doors open to the student street. Comfortable seating, a self-issue terminal, PCs for email and internet access and a study garden all contribute to the informal atmosphere. The ground floor houses the careers service, interview rooms, a careers library and more PCs with online access to careers materials.



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Photos: courtesy of FG Library Products



'From a design standpoint,' says Dave Worrall, FG's project manager for the design and fit out, 'we wanted to achieve something informal and inviting, with breakout areas and easy seating. We incorporated the traffic light colour scheme into fascia, local seating and soft furnishings for each floor.'

The Staff Learning Centre is also on the ground floor, housing not only the education library and e-learning resources, but a fully equipped classroom for training and teaching simulation.

As students move through to 'amber' on the first floor they discover the main printed library resources and a more formal level of study in a space housing the Learning Support service, and group study rooms with desktop PCs and wireless enabled laptops on open access.

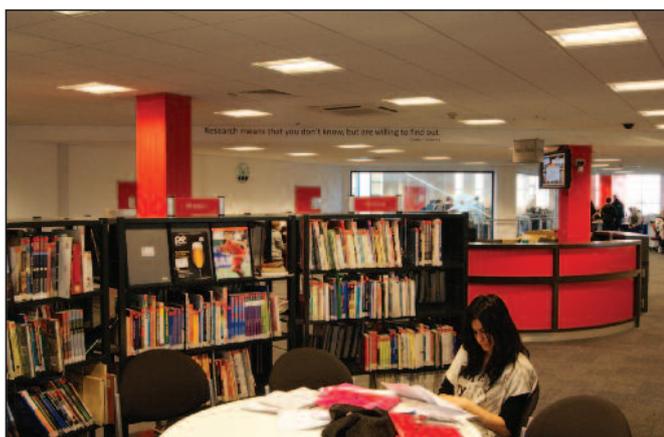
The second floor, the 'red' floor, is the main home for the centre's IT support and technical staff, with 74 drop-in PCs and three bookable spaces each with 24 PCs. The second floor is also the home for the sciences library.

There are help desks, self-issue terminals and a PC for the catalogue available on each floor in approximately the same positions, with plasma information screens in various locations showing News24 and displaying the college bulletin.

Highly visual, highly visible

The openness of the plan and its final design has created not only a highly visual impact but a high level of visibility from the outside, opening up an inviting space with good sight lines, curved shelving, and a free-flowing, soft 'hugging' line to create individual 'hubs' and personal spaces.

The shelving is from the Uniflex range, exclusive to FG in the UK. It's a versatile and flexible shelving range with a robust steel sectional frame but with a variety of panel options,



colours and finishes in wood, glass and acrylic. Display systems are from FG's Freedom range of high impact but space conserving units designed in consultation with both architects and librarians.

The background colour was anthracite grey throughout, with colours picked out in acetate panels for the help desks. Display units were also matched to the floor colour schemes. By designing study tables, chairs and workstations in neutral colours the centre has complete flexibility of movement to create study spaces anywhere in the building.

Flexibility has been a central consideration throughout the design and implementation. So the college wisely delayed completing the signage until the location of resources and services was finalised. The signage is custom-made in matching colours from FG's extensive range of innovative signage products.

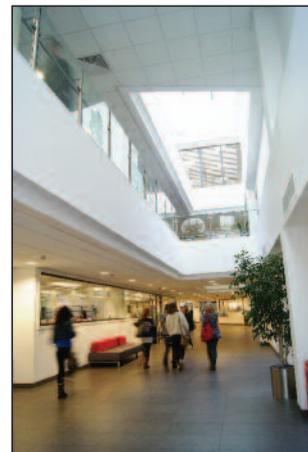
Still learning

'We wanted to allow students to be able to find an appropriate working space that met their needs at any particular time,' says Fid. 'It was important to allow students to take resources with them wherever they were in the centre without being issued and to get access to IT when and where they needed it and not in another dedicated block.'

The design and layout concepts have had an impact not only on users and how they move through the space and use the Learning Centre, but on staff and how they interact with students and with each other.

It has meant regrouping resources and relocating everything in the library catalogue. Introducing self-service has freed up staff time to provide a more personal service to learners and to manage stock and resources more effectively. As Fid explains, re-conceiving the physical space means entirely rethinking processes and how teams interact and communicate. 'We needed to review every point of interaction, not only with learners but with each other and between working teams on each floor. New systems such as self-issue have allowed us to introduce new ways of working, with ultimately a greater staff focus on priorities and a better experience for learners.'

■ *David Lindley is Director of The Libraries Agency (<http://www.librariesagency.com>).*



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