

# Insight

## Aligning learning and teaching space for a better university experience

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### ***A short story of a typical day in the class***

*A lecturer arrives in her class on a Tuesday afternoon with a lot of excitement. She has prepared a debate session where 40 students will be working in smaller groups to develop their critical thinking and communication skills. The classroom has a capacity of 40 students. It is laid out in lecture-style rows, which is its standard configuration. She thinks of changing the layout so that students could be sat in groups. However, the tables are heavy to be lifted by her and so are the chairs. Given the duration of the class being 50 minutes only, there is no scope to waste any time in rearranging the furniture. Even if she pursued help from some students who had arrived by now, there is no space to do so. As more students start arriving, some of them turn around the chairs to form a group, while others sit as a group in a row. Bags are put on the floor, coats on the chairs and phones emerge out of the pockets. Some students have laptops while others have notepads. The tidy layout of the classroom in rows turns feral. The lecturer and students get stuck into the session and the classroom disappears in the background. It is not long before the classroom re-emerges to the foreground. The lecturer attempts to rove between the groups. But she struggles to reach nearer a few students who are sitting in the corner of the rows. She leaps over bags on the floor while being conscious of not getting her foot strangled in one of the bags. Amidst all these, she wishes only if the classroom was slightly bigger and was configured to match her session.*

### A long-standing challenge

The story above is not rare and might manifest in different forms. For example, it could include struggles to make expensive and sophisticated audio-visual equipment work. The delivery of a pedagogically innovative session could be impoverished due to a classroom that is not aligned to those intentions. Achieving alignment between learning and space has been a long-standing matter of concern. In 2007, following an in-depth review of literature on higher education learning spaces, [Paul Temple](#) concluded that “... connection between day-to-day premises maintenance and learning

*may need to be drawn to the attention of institutional managements. It seems that small things may make a big difference to learning, rather than, necessarily, grand architectural statements".* A decade and a half later, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, [Ian Taylor](#) calls for architectural interventions based on an integrative approach linking learning spaces and teaching/learning styles.

**But how easy is it to achieve such alignment? Answer: Not easy at all.**

The reasons it is difficult:

- Conceptual dogma: Learning is not bounded between the four walls of the classroom or during the contact hours with tutors. Understanding the use of spaces for learning outside timetabled hours, which I label as "on-demand learning spaces" is becoming critical. Moreover, a range of learning spaces is required to suit different learning activities. For instance, there is a growing demand for quiet study spaces for groups and individuals, which are in danger of getting sidelined amidst the major trend to increase collaborative group workspaces. A strategic campus-wide approach is required which spans timetabled and on-demand spaces. A building as a conceptual unit is redundant.
- Fragmented processes: Alignment between learning and space is not a one-off activity to be conducted when starting new building projects. It requires continuous effort and ongoing attention. Procurement systems, governance processes, management tools and organisational practices need to reflect the continuous nature of the alignment activity.
- Organisational silos: The 'Aligning learning and space' survey conducted in 2021 discovered that the capabilities for aligning learning and space are dispersed within an institution. Moreover, the design and management of learning spaces need to bring together education/academic developers, IT specialists and Estates professionals. Staff at the front-line of the delivery need to be supported with tools and capabilities to inform the development of learning spaces and adjust existing spaces to suit their curriculum design. Last, but not in any way least, the lessons learnt from students' experience of their curriculum is integral in shaping estate interventions.

While the above challenges are complex, the 'Learning-Space Aligner' tool aims to provide a first step in creating an action plan for change. The tool is based on the research that I have been conducting in the higher education sector for the last decade. It does not claim to be a magic wand that will make all the problems go away. It is rather a friend that can aid to bring together key stakeholders to have a progressive conversation.