

**UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP TEAM**

**22<sup>nd</sup> June 2016**

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**FLEXIBLE CLASSROOMS DEVELOPMENT AND PROTOCOLS**

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**PURPOSE**

This protocol paper aims to clarify the University's commitment to the ongoing development of flexible classrooms by its directorates and faculties through the leadership of the Future Learning Spaces Group (FLSG). The commitment will inform the routine arrangements for the management of flexible classrooms and the development of related systems. It is fully acknowledged that flexible classrooms exist within a range of appropriate learning provision including lecture theatres, laboratories, personal study areas and spaces for social learning.

**KEY ISSUES**

The development of the flexible classroom at Sheffield Hallam is a key focus in developing high quality teaching, learner engagement and student success. The work of FLSG and its engagement with the academic community reveals the University's historic approach to classroom design to be uncritical and unsuitable to meet the strategic aims for teaching and learning.

The development and management of classrooms is complex. Multiple directorates are involved in matters relating to the effectiveness of the University's learning spaces. This is the case for the development of flexible classrooms too and co-operative practices across the University have emerged to create clarity around developing classrooms fit to meet future needs including the seamless integration of digital practices.

A statement describing the characteristics and protocols associated with developing flexible classrooms will help the University as a whole, including our academic staff, to connect learning to space.

**ACTION REQUIRED**

The University Leadership Team is asked to approve the protocols for flexible classrooms and support the Future Learning Spaces Group, the University's directorates and faculties to further develop and implement the flexible classroom model.

The University leadership team is asked to note the contribution of this work to the University's Digital Learning Programme.

Sheffield Hallam University

**TO BE INTRODUCED BY**

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Chair of the Future Learning Spaces Group

## **FLEXIBLE CLASSROOMS DEVELOPMENT AND PROTOCOLS**

### **AIM**

The aim of this protocol is to establish University-wide commitment, principles and practice for the effective use of flexible classrooms and to clarify the arrangements for their management and ongoing development.

The University's interest in developing its classrooms as flexible learning spaces is central to developing appreciation of and practice in using its other types of formal and informal, physical and digital learning spaces.

A protocol statement is a clarification of the University's commitment to ongoing development and practice to aid the alignment of multiple stakeholders.

### **BACKGROUND**

The Future Learning Spaces Group (FLSG) was established to oversee the design of new buildings, the refurbishment of existing formal facilities with a particular focus on the quality of the learning spaces. The group is responsible for ensuring that these developments are in line with other forward-looking universities in the sector where there has been a significant move from traditional classroom teacher-centred configurations to more flexible designs that facilitate student-centred approaches to learning.

The University's strategic interest in learning spaces is a manifestation of its commitment to teaching, learning, student engagement and progression. Research and discourse in the sector has moved on from that of 'landmark buildings' in the mid-2000s to the recognition that space and the development of 'place' matters to student engagement and belonging (Neary *et al.*, 2010; Temple, 2007).

The work of the FLSG supports the development of diverse and flexible pedagogies and it challenges longstanding and inflexible attitudes and assumptions that discourage innovation and hinder the strategic aims of the University and the future goals of our students. This work is underpinned by the principle that the classroom should reflect a *learning* paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995) in which the role of the teacher is to engage and challenge students more flexibly (FLSG, 18 April 2016).

The University does not currently have a policy or protocol statement that clarifies how classrooms should be designed or specified to support student-centred interactive and flexible teaching and learning methods. Currently the University, its systems and practices in relation to the management and organisation of its classrooms, however, reflect a *teaching-centred* paradigm that is at odds with our interests in engaging students deeply through classroom learning. Classroom layouts and arrangements, at some point in the past have led to inflexible, teaching rooms which perpetuate a dependence upon didactic methods amongst teachers and students. Teachers involved through FLSG confirm that inflexible space is pedagogically limiting. Clarity over the arrangements for the design and management of flexible classrooms will support and encourage our teachers to more effectively engage our students with their learning in more diverse and student-centred ways.

The physical learning space is inseparable from the digital learning space. Technologies, and the capabilities to use them, promise a new hybrid, seamlessly connected learning space. This will be explored through the ongoing work of FLS, but the implications of this as

an opportunity for step change development will be the focus of the University's Digital Learning Programme.

## **COMMITTING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERACTIVE FLEXIBLE CLASSROOMS**

The University is committed to developing teaching and learning that stimulates our students' interest in all of its formal and informal spaces by using well-thought through approaches.

Amongst the University's diverse learning spaces, the imaginative, flexible and interactive use of the classroom establishes a setting for challenging and rewarding teaching and learning experiences. The concept of the interactive flexible classroom has emerged as a key learning space through the works of the FLSG and University stakeholder groups.

The impact of the flexible classroom on learner engagement, on teaching and learning, and on student success can be optimised by:

- developing appreciation of, and commitment to, student-centred active learning methods amongst our academic community;
- drawing upon established principles of good university teaching to develop the capabilities of academic staff to use the flexible classroom's physical and digital attributes with confidence and fluency;
- establishing cabaret-style small group layout as a default classroom setting together with an expectation that classrooms should be arranged by the teacher and their students to reflect their developing needs and their associated flexible pedagogies;
- replacing heavy tables and chairs, through scheduled refurbishment cycles and special projects, with light, robust and easy to stack furniture so that teachers and their students can easily reconfigure rooms prior to, during and after formal sessions;
- developing a more flexible approach to room allocation so that student-centred active learning methods have the extra space they need to make full use of the room during normal teaching times. This can be achieved by accommodating unusually high demand with the provision of a small percentage of additional good quality stackable seating and extra folding tables in, or proximate to, classrooms;
- replacing through refurbishment cycles dominant lecterns with smaller rack systems, thereby removing a significant obstacle to classroom communications and making it easier for students and teachers to interact with each other;
- incorporating multiple screens in classrooms where this makes it easier for students to interact with projected information, including the content students may be involved in producing in class;
- incorporating whiteboards and other large writing surfaces to support student group work;
- continuing to enhance the underpinning technical infrastructure of classrooms for supporting learner interactivity within the classroom and connectivity to information, online media tools and services, and peer and professional networks beyond the classroom as a strategic priority;
- addressing, as a particular priority, the development of digital classrooms that enable all student participants, as guided by their teacher, to share and project the digital outputs of small group work activities from personal and provided devices for example;

- providing guidance to staff on effectively using the facilities at the point of use, at the time of booking and through staff development.

The above points, and others, represent knowledge developed through the FLSG and successful collaborations involving directorate and faculty academic and professional services staff groups. Commitment to the development of the flexible classroom is ongoing and the continued support of senior management will aid its development.

## **PROTOCOL FOR THE USE OF FLEXIBLE CLASSROOMS**

The University commits to the ongoing refurbishment of its classrooms on both of its campuses. It will review its systems through the University's FLSG to ensure the principles of the flexible classroom outlined in this paper are reflected in the planning and operations of the University's directorates and faculties.

The Future Learning Spaces Group is working with FD and IS&T to ensure that routine classroom refurbishment considers adaptations to meet new learning and teaching needs within existing budgets. Also the Future Learning Spaces Group will offer teaching enhancement sessions across the University focussed on the places that staff are currently using for teaching. This aims to support staff in enhancing their teaching to improve NSS and PTES scores in teaching quality. The programme will be delivered within existing LEAD resource and will bring a full costed plan to ULT by late 2016 for consideration in the 2017/8 planning round.

Flexible classrooms at Sheffield Hallam University are designed to engage and challenge students in ways the teacher determines to be most effective in their learning context. This creates a student-centred learning environment in which the teacher is able to use diverse methods to engage the learning community effectively.

Teachers and their students are strongly encouraged to consider their use of classroom layout and to arrange their classrooms so that they promote interactivity, peer co-operation, and stimulating and challenging learning experiences.

Initial pilots in establishing flexible classrooms indicate that there is a need to clarify underlying good practice in classroom organisation. To ensure academic staff and their students are not inconvenienced, staff using flexible classrooms are asked to be considerate of their colleagues and to:

- leave flexible classrooms set up ready for use in cabaret-style, the University's default layout for small group teaching;
- do **not** take furniture that is allocated to another room as this will leave fellow academics without the facilities they need to teach their students;
- return furniture at the end of a session in the unusual situation of it being necessary to move it out of a classroom temporarily;
- report broken or worn out furniture, fittings to FD Helpdesk ([! FD Customer Services](#) or call 4444) and report issues with technical facilities to IT Help ([ithelp@shu.ac.uk](mailto:ithelp@shu.ac.uk) or call 3333)

The ULT is asked to approve the Flexible Classrooms Protocol and to note the proposed programme of work to develop this dimension of the University's Future Learning Spaces.

## **APPENDIX ONE: RATIONALE FOR FLEXIBLE CLASSROOMS WITHIN THE RANGE OF TEACHING SPACES OFFERED**

Good teaching comes from the teacher's evaluation of, and response to, the diverse learning context. This includes the subject matter, the learning needs of their students, the context provided by the wider course and graduate aspirations, and their own imagination and capabilities. These factors inform the design and selection of the classroom methods used by the teacher. Thomas (2009, p. 502) points out that physical learning spaces, such as classrooms, have a lifespan that outlasts "the definitions and learning theories of which they are an embodiment." This adds to a teaching "inertia" (Weller, 2007, p. 154) that constrains thinking about learning due to the limited affordances of existing learning spaces.

Flexible classrooms enable teachers to engage and inspire their students through student-centred and interactive methods. These facilitate diverse opportunities for engagement and delivery and lead to greater interpersonal connection between staff, students and peers and promote feelings of being valued in class and the building of self-esteem, in turn fostering student success.

To date the University has not had a stated position about the default layout of its classrooms. FLSG has identified classroom layout as a significant issue affecting teaching philosophies especially where rooms are difficult to reconfigure. The uncritical habit of setting out tables and chairs in rows and the development of a dominant teaching wall is characteristic of teaching philosophies established in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century during the "industrialisation" of education (Scott-Webber, 2003). These types of classroom were specifically designed to accommodate large numbers of students, involved in learning by rote, achieved by arranging them in rows to face their teacher. Such facilities are recognisable by the incorporation of dominant 'teaching walls'; a substantial space dedicated to the teacher and optimised for instructive didactic methods including the presentation of materials.

Such spaces were not designed for the learning experiences associated with developing higher order thinking and the capabilities that are essential for higher education in 2016. Learning in higher education needs to reflect the changing world context and support the development of graduate capabilities for the digital-social age; an age in which learning and working flexibly with peers in physical and online networks is more characteristic of our times than the hierarchical relationships of previous era.

The needs of higher education learning are different now. This difference is heightened given the challenges of the digital age and the associated global demand for graduates who are personally confident, capable and agile, and who are well-versed in developing their professional identity and attributes in a rich and digitally-enhanced context. Scheduled teaching provides an important opportunity for students and their teachers to work closely together in classroom situations by using and developing content, supporting and challenging each other, resolving authentic problems, receiving feedback, testing and comparing understandings co-operatively with peers, valuing their own diversity, drawing upon their ubiquitous technologies to connect to information and networks beyond their own space, and so forth.

To this end the University needs to signal clearly its expectation that our students need to be engaged through deep learning strategies characterised by interaction with their tutors and peers during scheduled formal learning. The University's classrooms need to reflect fundamental ideas for effective undergraduate teaching as described in widely cited publications on learning in higher education. For example the work of Chickering and

Gamson's (1987) *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* and Barr and Tagg's (1995) research describing the shift from the instructional paradigm to the learning paradigm. More recently, in the UK, Gibbs' (2010) report on *Dimensions of Quality* concluded that it is the quality of the pedagogical model that leads to learning gain more than it is necessarily the quantity of time involved. Texts on how people learn in higher education (e.g. Bransford *et al.*, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999; Wenger *et al.*, 2002; Kuh, 2009) repeatedly conclude that higher education learning spaces need to support socially situated learning tasks.

George Kuh (2009) has conducted extensive studies on learning gain and student success and describes the importance of high-impact activities. He correlates student success with, "engaging classroom pedagogical practices" (p. 31) and says, "to engage students at high levels, these practices must be done well" (p. 30), by which he means the learning commitment and context must be optimal.

Establishing suitable flexible space is critical therefore for effective student engagement in learning.

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