

## Victoria University: Building the Learning Commons

Since 2005, the redevelopment of physical library spaces at Victoria University (VU) has been driven by the 'learning commons' concept as a central feature of the university's campus planning strategy. A recent paper by VU's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Elizabeth Harman, and Dr Belinda Johnson situates the learning commons:

*VU's new Learning Commons is a development that bears out our shift to learner-centred, collaborative learning both in terms of the material environment and the learning approach it symbolises. It works from a founding tenet that students should not have to know the organisational structure of the University in order to gain access to the assistance and resources they require for their learning. The Learning Commons is a 'one stop shop' for learning support. It provides improved computing services; a mix of study spaces for working independently or in groups; access to digital resources; traditional library collections and services; integrated help desk; access to learning support services both physical and virtual; a café and food vending machines; and other student services situated near by ... The Learning Commons embodies an approach to supporting student learning that recognises the need to take into account the whole learning experience of the learner while at university, not just their time in the classroom.<sup>1</sup>*

Three libraries have been transformed from self-contained library spaces to become home to a group of partners offering key educational support services in a shared environment.

**The City Flinders Learning Commons** opened in October 2006 and became a prototype or testing ground for the learning commons model. Against a background of striking 360 degree city views, the commons combines a library collection, diverse spaces to support different learning styles and a mix of educational services including Learning Support, Language support, Careers and IT. Despite the restrictions of the fifteenth floor in a high-rise building, City Flinders has adopted an innovative service model utilising Student Rovers alongside collection minimalisation strategies and self-service circulation.

**The St Albans and Werribee Campus Learning Commons** were developed through the large-scale refurbishment of existing library spaces. Both libraries underwent a transformation in 2005 to support an extensive injection of technology. The 2007 redesigns added Learning and Language support, and

the university's Careers Service. New discrete learning spaces were built to allow the application of advanced 'assisted study' environments supported by Teaching and Learning staff.

Although the university delivers a range of higher education and TAFE programs across eleven different campuses, the **Footscray Park** campus is still the site of over fifty per cent of the

university's activity. The existing library is almost twenty years old. The Footscray Park Exercise and Sport Science Precinct and Learning Commons project will depart from the current configuration of aerial walkways connecting separate faculty buildings. Campus life will return to the 'terra firma' of connected courtyards with ground floor access and entry.

The project will completely refurbish the library space and develop extensive facilities into an iconic new building to be constructed on the north side of the campus facing the Maribyrnong River. The \$54 million dollar project will create 1,600 learning spaces, seven large-scale collaborative teaching spaces and an engaging mix of spaces offering differing interior landscapes. The learning spaces will combine the social, group and focused learning experience with access to the café and outside terraces. The scale and complexities of the project will result in a long construction process, with an expected opening date in early 2010.

Other libraries on VU campuses with a strong TAFE focus are **Sunshine and Footscray Nicholson**. Challenges are likely when extending library access to 24/7 and balancing the trade-off between collection sizes and expanding learning spaces.

**Philip G Kent, University Librarian and Adrian Gallagher, Manager Learning Commons Library**  
adrian.gallagher@vu.edu.au



City Flinders Learning Commons



St Albans Campus Learning Commons



Artist's impression, Footscray Park

1. Harman, E., Johnston, B (2007). 'Learning (in) contexts: Re-imagining campuses and partnerships at a New School of Thought'. Higher Education in the 21st Century Diversity of Missions Conference. Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin, June 25-27, 2007. <[http://www.vu.edu.au/home/Making\\_VU\\_a\\_New\\_School\\_of\\_Thought/index.aspx](http://www.vu.edu.au/home/Making_VU_a_New_School_of_Thought/index.aspx)>, viewed 1 October 2007