The concept of the Learning Commons is where students are in charge – they are directing their own learning. And the facilities empower them to design their own learning methodology.
Finding space to build housing and offices amid Hong Kong’s mountainous terrain is difficult under any circumstances. Imagine the challenges University faced in finding enough space for a whole new university campus.

It was designed so that the whole infrastructure is a learning instrument and a learning exercise for students.

“To provide space to match our academic ambitions,” Vice-Chancellor Lap-Chee Tsui recently wrote in a message to the University community, “our colleagues literally moved a mountain (or at least part of one) and built the Centennial Campus.”

However, the new campus - more precisely an extension of the old one - is not just an engineering feat. It was designed so that the whole infrastructure is a learning instrument for students.

The Centennial Campus was completed in September 2012, during the 100th anniversary year of the admission of the first cohort of students admitted to the University. The opening also coincided with the implementation of Hong Kong’s new four-year undergraduate curriculum.
Cover Story

Designing for Flexible Learning

According to Professor John Malpas, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Infrastructure who helped design and oversee the construction of the new campus, the HK$3 billion project was designed to complement the new curriculum, which requires students to take courses outside their area of focus and engage with the local and global communities.

One of the distinctive features is the Chi Wah Learning Commons. It has provided state-of-the-art facilities and space for student learning with 6,000 square metres of up-to-the-minute technology and collaborative learning space. Professor Tsui’s administration set “student-centred learning” as one of the goals for the coming era and the Commons was designed with that goal in mind.
Connection, Collaboration and Inclusion

The layout has the principles of inclusion and open communication built directly into it, according to Dr Danny Tang 鄧華厚 (BSc 1977; MSc(Eng) 1995), the Director of Information Technology Services. “Our aim is to provide an environment that emphasises three main connections,” Dr Tang said. “First, for students and staff to connect; second, to connect to a virtual space by the area being well covered by plug, outlets and wireless connections; third, to connect to classrooms so, where most libraries have only one entrance, we have many entrances and there is free movement between the classrooms, lecture halls, theatres and the Learning Commons.”

It provides all the facilities a student needs at any particular time so they can learn at any time, the time that is best for them.

The Commons has 400-odd computers and is fully interactive. There is a wide variety of spaces for both individual and group learning: private study rooms that can be booked by students and staff on a first-come, first-served basis; quiet areas; reading rooms; lounges; computer workstations; group study rooms; and study booths. It contains different facilities so that students can work individually or in groups or with teachers or tutors. Students can leave a formal teaching session and then break into a small informal setting, taking the conversation that began in the classroom outside with professors and fellow students.

“It provides all the facilities a student needs at any particular time so they can learn at any time, the time that is best for them,” says Professor Malpas.

A coffee corner will soon be open, and students will be able to eat and drink in certain areas.
Fresh Thinking

The whole space is supported by a number of academic facilities. At the second-floor Student Advisory Services Zone, services are provided for students by departments such as Information Technology, the Libraries, the Centre for Applied English Studies, the Centre of Development and Resources for Students, and the Academic Advising Office.

There are service counters on each floor staffed by technicians, student helpers and library assistants available to help students. Staff members on duty are identified by light-blue vests with “Learning Services” written on the back. There is a language practice laboratory with tutors to help students improve their spoken and written English. There are nine interview rooms for one-on-one discussions.

Mr Peter Sidorko, the Librarian, calls it “a common area where multiple service providers provide a one-stop-shop location for student needs”.
Sidorko’s bailiwick includes the Main Library and six branches, plus the library’s presence in the Learning Commons. “Print, technology, digital resources, hardware as well as software – all of that comes together in this space,” he said of the Commons. “The key focus is on using information, and everything that’s here supports the use of information for learning.”

Smaller versions of the Learning Commons are being built in various buildings around campus. In addition, the Oval on the first floor of Knowles Building and the third floor of the Main Library, although not strictly Learning Commons hubs, were also converted into new learning spaces.

Chi Wah Learning Commons 智華館

was made possible with the support of the Chi Wah Foundation 智華基金 which was established by Mr Colin Lam 林高演 (BSc 1973) in 1992 to help the needy and promote education.

(From left) Vice-Chancellor Lap-Chee Tsui 徐立之, Dr Lee Shau Kee 李兆基 and Mr Colin Lam.

What underlies our innovative pedagogy is flexibility.

“What underlies our innovative pedagogy is flexibility,” said Professor Malpas. “It’s difficult to design one room that can do everything. No one room can. So we have tried to keep a number of facilities near each other so students can find what they need.”

The Commons is already winning plaudits from students. “It’s more relaxing and easier to study here than anywhere else,” said Elaine Hunter, an exchange student from Manchester University studying Geography and International Studies. “The use of space is really comfortable and helps me concentrate and there are a lot of windows, making it quite bright inside.”

Manon Leclere, a Business and Economics exchange student from Lille, France, said she comes to the Commons two or three times a week. “I come here because of the group meeting rooms,” she said. “You can book a room and work together with other students on the same project and it is a nice place to study.”

The whole dovetails neatly with Professor Tsui’s goal of “student-centred learning.”

“The concept is that students are in charge – they are directing their own learning,” Professor Malpas said. “And the facilities empower them to design their own learning methodology.”

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