

UK Higher Education Spotlight



Spaces for people - What students and workers want

“ The fact that many spaces still score very low on basics such as noise, temperature and comfort is a challenge for all of us who work in the built environment ”

In this edition of our Higher Education Spotlight we turn to the fundamental question of what people want from the spaces in which they study or work.

Historically we have often got away with providing the spaces that we feel work best for our users, often without even asking the user their opinion. However, the ever increasing focus on satisfaction, wellness, productivity and happiness has led to a more collaborative way of planning and delivering high-performing spaces. This is only set to increase as users demand more control, and technology enables more monitoring and modelling of what really works.

The challenge for estates teams is that one size does not fit all. We have to design our spaces to suit a variety of workstyles and an even wider variety of personalities. Should we be focusing on delivering the ‘wow factor’ or just on getting the basics of temperature, light and noise right?

We believe that there is a huge opportunity for higher education estates teams to learn from the corporate office world where many of these issues are already being tested, and a wide variety of data is available. However, the information flow should go both ways, as many forward looking corporates are now recognising that lifelong learning is an employee perk.

In this report we look at common findings between employee and student workplace studies, and suggest some key strategies for both worlds.

1 Student and worker satisfaction

The last few years have seen an increasing focus on customer experience in both the Higher Education and Office property sectors, with both groups chasing the holy grail of better engagement with those that use their estates for greater user satisfaction, productivity and wellness. We believe that there are significant cross-overs in best practice between the two fields as employers and universities seek to deliver a better customer experience.

Coincidentally the latest Student Academic Experience Survey of 14,072 students was published in the same week as Savills own What Workers Want survey of 11,000 office workers. Both studies have notable thematic similarities, most notably the importance of getting the basics right.

What is apparent from both studies is that Estates teams play a significant part in delivering user satisfaction. The HEPI survey

must have warmed the hearts of university estates directors with one particular finding that when asked “which areas of university spend are the most reasonable use of tuition fees” ‘teaching facilities’ and ‘campus development’ came first and third in terms of importance (somewhat surprisingly ahead of teaching staff).

Similarly, the What Workers Want survey identified that office workers in the UK consider the comfort of the work environment as the most important factor in an ideal workplace.

Clearly space and the environment are fundamental parts of users’ perceptions of value for money, happiness and ultimately productivity. However, this should come as no surprise to anyone who is in the business of supplying and operating such spaces.

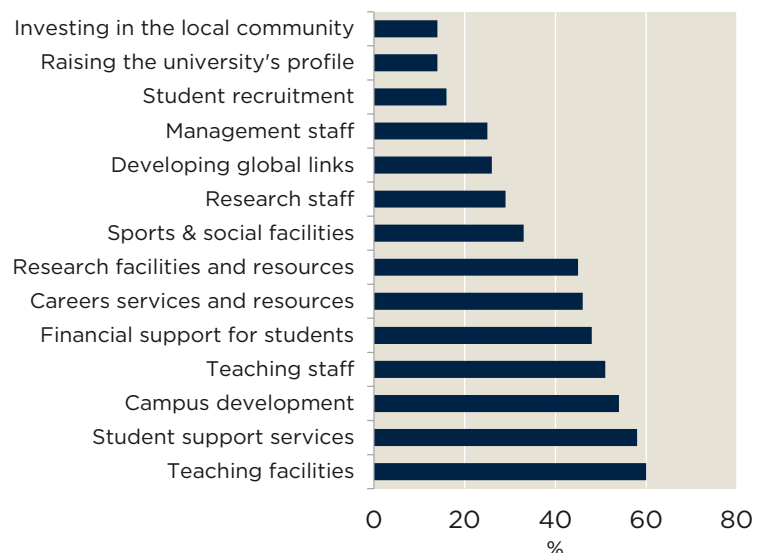
The surprise perhaps comes from the fact that despite nearly 50 years of asking people what

they want from their spaces, the spaces that we are delivering are still scoring relatively weakly on many of the most basic metrics of satisfaction.

For example, in the world’s largest standardised database of workplace experience which has responses from over 500,000 employees, only 53% of respondents agreed that their workplace was somewhere they were proud to bring visitors to, and only 59.6% said it was an enjoyable environment to work in.

While one might credibly argue that people, particularly the young, are more demanding today than they were fifty years ago, the fact that many spaces still score very low on basics such as noise, temperature and comfort is a challenge for those of us who work in the built environment.

Spending priorities: Which areas of university spend are the most reasonable use of tuition fees?



Source Student Academic Experience Survey 2019

2 What does a good space look like?

The challenge for estates teams in both education and the workplace is that one size definitely does not fit all. The HEPI survey identifies clear differences in the needs and perceptions of younger undergraduates and mature students, and also between students who commute and those who do not. There are also marked difference between the needs of students studying different subjects.

Furthermore, an increasingly hot topic in workplace design is catering to the needs of different personality types. This topic was also picked up in a paper presented by Dr Hannah Wilson at the recent Design & Management of Learning Environments conference. Her 2017 thesis on the impact of personality types on student satisfaction at Liverpool John Moores University, not only identifies a whole spectrum of factors that affect student satisfaction with the learning environment, but also through studies of different faculties sought to highlight where needs differed between types of personalities.

What came through most strongly from Wilson’s study was the importance of getting the basics right, rather than over-focusing on hot or fashionable issues. For example ‘access to technology’ and ‘access to suitable clean toilets’ were the overall most important factors to students, while ‘motivating environment’ came at the bottom.

Similarly in Savills 2019 What Workers Want Survey ‘quality of wifi’ and ‘quiet space for focused work’ scored far higher in terms of perceived importance than the building’s environmental performance or the availability of a crèche or free food.

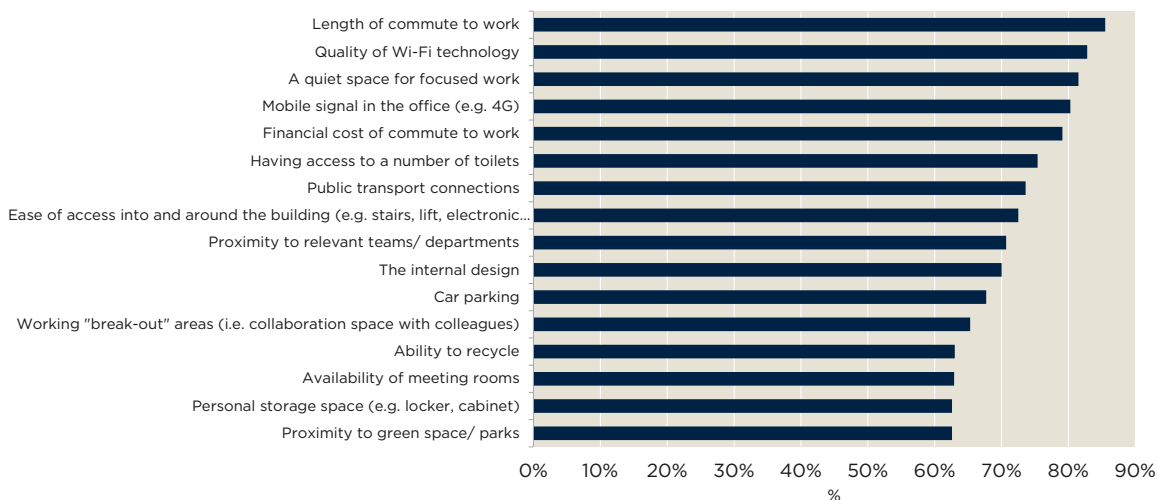
This raises the question of whether it is more productive to focus on delivering what people like, or removing the factors that they don’t like. In the workspace design world it is perhaps inevitable that the most attention is given to new and quirky ideas such as running tracks on roofs, slides between floors, and town hall space. However, what makes people happy is probably more subject to age and personality than what irritates them. Tim Oldman, the CEO of Leesman, which has the world’s largest database of employee satisfaction surveys, suggests that we should focus more on “productivity toxins” that make people unhappy or represent a barrier to them learning or working effectively.

Asking staff and students what they are most dissatisfied might be a more useful question than asking them what they want. For example in our latest What Workers Want report the four things that workers were most dissatisfied with were: lack of quiet spaces, air quality, temperature and noise level.

What is most depressing about these findings is that any workplace survey of the last 50 years would probably have delivered much the same conclusions. Indeed, the rise of the open-place workspace has arguably increased unhappiness with noise, air quality and smell. However, the fact that we are still not getting the basics of temperature and comfort right should mean that they are at the top of any estates strategy.

Of course, the challenge for estates directors in both universities and the corporate world is that generally their customers want everything, and their finance teams don’t want to pay for that!

What do workers want? Factors weighted as Important or Very Important



Source What Workers Want 2019 - Data for all UK and European respondents

54%
of students think that campus development is the most reasonable use of tuition fees

54%
of workers are proud to bring visitors to their workplace

“A lack of quiet spaces for focused work is the area which dissatisfies most people. 75% of people prefer to think creatively when on their own rather than in groups (Adobe, 2012)”

Wilson’s study highlighted this with students saying both that open spaces were very important for interaction, as was a variety of formal and informal workspace for meetings, lectures and quiet study. The corporate workspace design world has developed the term ‘Activity-based working environments’ (ABW) to describe this acceptance that the work or study day is not one of homogeneity, but is broken up into many small moments of different activity, all of which ideally will have an environment that enables the individual to do that activity unhindered by the space. This solution is also seen as potential fix to differing ages and personality types, by offering them enough variety of space to fit their needs.

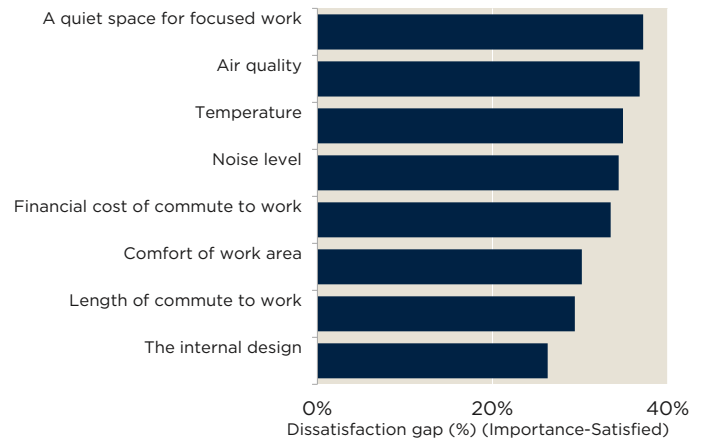
While this a not a new concept, with American architect Luchetti first talking about “activity settings based environments” in the 1970s, it really only started to gather pace when Veldhoen (who went on to design Microsoft’s Amsterdam HQ) wrote his book “The Demise of the Office”.

Dr Peggie Rothe of the Leesman Group recently carried out a study of 70,000 employees (11,000 of whom worked in environments that their employers described as offering ABW). She concluded that “the data consistently supported industry claims that ABW increased staff collaboration, productivity, pride and effectiveness. But also uncovered a series of failings and challenges that should act as important warning signals to any organisation considering an ABW workplace project.”

The claimed benefits of an ABW strategy as outlined by Rothe will be familiar to corporate and university estates directors:

- Healthier/more engaged and motivated employees;
- Greater employee empowerment and self determination;
- Better collaboration, knowledge transfer and learning
- Faster and more efficient decision making;
- Flexible physical infrastructure that can better adapt to organisational change.

Is fixing what makes people unhappy easier than trying to make everyone happy?

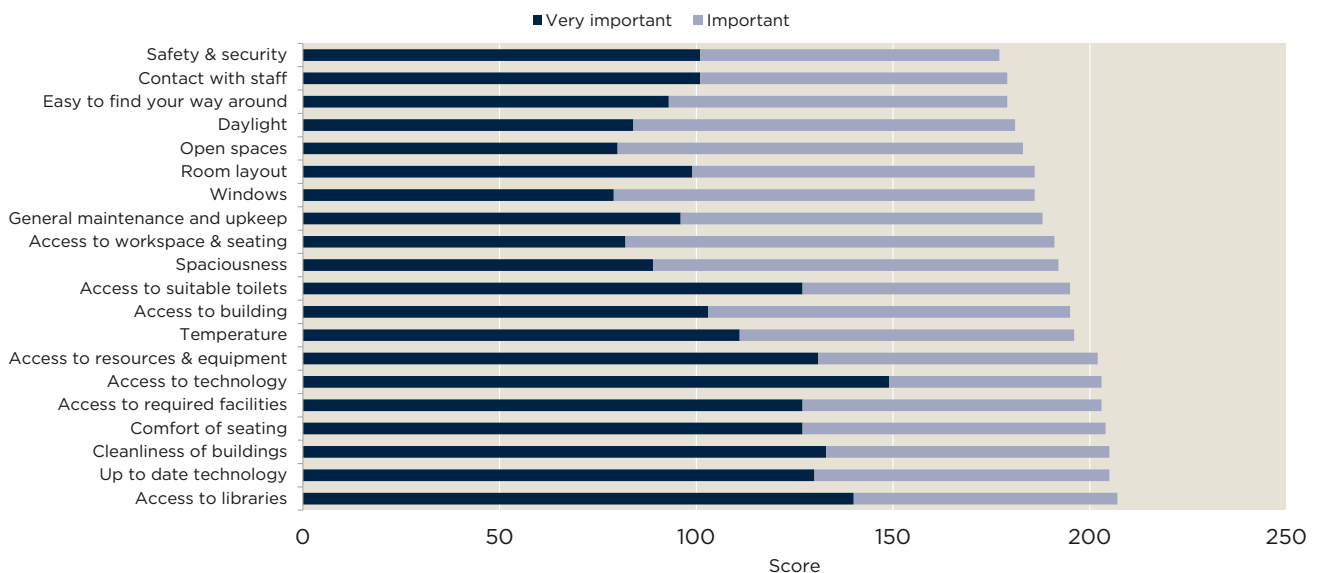


Source What Workers Want 2019 (UK & Europe)

Interestingly the Leesman work on ABW suggested that the biggest barrier to adoption of ABW was not the space, but the people. Also, of particular relevance to the Higher Education sector is the fact that it was the youngest employees in this survey who were the most sedentary and least likely to adopt a more mobile behaviour. This is probably due to the type of work that younger employees are asked to do (i.e. simpler and with less variation in terms of the balance between fixed address and social working).

Returning to our earlier theme of focusing on what is going wrong than trying to make everything perfect, the most interesting findings of Rothe’s survey are around why ABW was not adopted as fully as might be expected.

What do students want? The top 20 factors weighted as Important or Very Important



Source Wilson (2017)

“ In the WEF 2016 The Future of Jobs report creativity was rated the tenth most important skill. By 2020 it will be the third. ”

Reasons for poor adoption could include:

- The work profile of an individual or community just does not suit ABW;
- Too much reliance on a technology solution (e.g. wifi availability or a room booking system) that either fails or creates disengagement from the process;
- Poor communication – people need to be sold on how it will improve their lives, otherwise it can be seen as cost reduction exercise. In universities the communication needs to be with both the students and the academics and the messaging needs to be tailored to each group;
- Management – are managers capable of adapting to a new way of managing teams that may be spread out widely across a building?
- Isolation – do employees feel unconnected or adrift, and are they missing direct feedback and being part of a team?
- Suitable space – is the space too big and the environments too far apart for them to be utilised? While you might have a café or quiet working space, if it is ten minutes walk away will you use it?

3 Wellness and space

Wellness is one area where Higher Education is more evolved in its thinking than the corporate world, primarily due to the younger population in one community over the other, but also perhaps because some employers have historically seen this as someone else’s problem. Many employers are still struggling with how to make their staff happier (or less sad) so as to improved productivity. However, given that typically 55% of business costs are related to staff, and only 15% real-estate, spending more on the latter to improve the productivity of the former is increasingly being seen as the sensible and economic option.

What Workers Want 2019 generally paints a picture of more people being happy than not. Men (62%) are more likely to be happy with their workplace than women (58%) and the percentage of satisfied employees increases with the employee’s age. 63% of the respondents aged over 55 years old are satisfied with their workplace against 58% for the respondents aged between 18 and 34 years old. There is also a wide discrepancy between countries: Dutch employees (73%) are significantly happier than workers from other nationalities, followed by Swedish workers (65%). On the other side of the spectrum, French (49%) and British (53%) are the least satisfied with their workplace.

Key environmental themes that seem to affect happiness include shorter commutes, less reliance on public transport,

adoption of ABW, having control over your environment, and being asked your opinions about it.

However, the room for improvement in corporate workspace is still considerable, with 25% reporting that their workplace has a negative effect on their mental health, and 27% on their physical health. The survey does show that the proportion of workers that are happy with their workplace in the UK has risen from 48% in 2016 to 53% in 2018. This is a more positive trend than that has been seen in successive Student Academic Experience surveys, suggesting that the corporate workspace may be developing strategies that could be adopted by the HE sector.

Somewhat inevitably the early focus on health and well-being in the workplace has been on measuring it and trying to prove a link between improvements in wellness and productivity. The US is the birthplace of the two leading health & well-being frameworks for workplaces – the WELL® Building Standard and Fitwel® Rating System. They were initiated at a similar point in time in the early 2010s, developed separately and each tested through dedicated pilot programs. WELL v1 administered by The International Well Building Institute (IWBI) was first to release in October 2014, with Fitwel v1 following in December 2016 administered by the Center for Active Design (CfAD).

WELL and Fitwel broadly address similar health & well-being concerns but operate via different system structures, through different lenses, with different emphases, to differing levels of detail and documentation -and at different price points.

There is also some measurement cross-over between these two systems and the more established environmental certification systems such as Ska, BREEAM and LEED. However, the concept is we believe still very much in its infancy and will evolve as the costs of collecting environmental data in a building or across a campus fall, the quality of the data improves, and correlations between currently unconnected datasets become established.

We would also suggest that estates teams do not fall into the same traps that we fell into when the environmental sustainability debate began to emerge in the built environment twenty years ago. In retrospect the industry was wrong to ask, “will a tenant pay more rent for a greener building?”, when the question should have been “will a more sustainable building prove more attractive due to lower energy bills?”. The equivalent trap in the wellness debate might be over-focusing on proving that there is a linkage between happiness, health and productivity when we all know that this is the case.

Going back to the typical 55%:15% cost split between staff and premises, surely spending a bit more on premises to boost staff wellness should be an easy decision to make? The challenge is working out where and on what you should make this extra spend. The 2018 report “Wellness Matters” by the

64%

of workers say that their workplace enables them to work productively

Access to libraries and access to technology were rated the two most important factors by students at Liverpool John Moores

“ Wellness and sustainability are linked, but a green building is not necessarily a healthy building ”

British Council for Offices makes a variety of recommendations for different type of building and project.

The key findings of this report that we feel are most relevant to Higher Education estates projects are:

- Wellness matter to individuals, organisations, government and society;
- Wellness and sustainability are linked, but a green building is not necessarily a healthy building;
- Perceived (rather than actual) cost and lack of leadership are significant barriers to progress;
- Evidence base is strong in some areas, yet weak in others. It is also challenging to navigate;
- There is a lack of common vocabulary between medicine, well-being, and space design;
- Wellness is team sport and all stakeholders can contribute to a successful outcome;
- Asking users what does and doesn't work is not only important for measurement and delivery, but the mere fact of being consulted on these issues improves people's satisfaction with their spaces and environments.

Another hot topic in corporate real-estate is education. Major employers, brands and real-estate developers are increasingly embracing the idea of further education as a staff perk or as an anchor for a healthy and stimulating mixed-use environment.

We expect that offering employees continuing professional development or access to non work-related education throughout their working life will be increasingly seen as a tool to attract and retain the best talent.

Specialist office providers such as Convene are emerging to facilitate the delivery of seminar, lecture and community spaces that would be instantly recognisable to every University estate director. Surely the next step of the enlightened employer would be to learn from, or possibly even joint venture with, those who have been delivering this kind of space for their core business?

Might the next step for a high-performing headquarters building be to include collaboration space curated by the University of X?

4 What can workplaces learn from educational spaces (and vice versa)

There is clearly a common goal in estate strategies in both the corporate office and the higher education estate, namely the desire to create spaces and places that make users happy and productive. Our work in both sectors has enabled us to identify some key themes that can and should be share more for the good of all.

The first opportunity is around sharing experience and metrics. There are already huge datasets on educational user experience in both the USA and the UK, and some are beginning to be developed in the office sector. Given that most students become workers, then there is a strong argument that the data is transplantable, and that understanding how students have learned will benefit their future employers.

Our experience in both sectors, and literature review for this paper, suggests that both groups of interested parties are asking much the same questions. Better and more wide-ranging data would improve the evidence base and make real-estate spending decisions easier to justify.

There are also some areas where the finding of corporate worker research studies could help direct HE policies. For example, most workplace studies suggest that the length of commute has a huge impact on staff satisfaction, with the longer the commute is the more the negative effect. This would suggest that the policy shift in education to encourage students to live at home to reduce costs must be considered in terms of the potential negative impact on their overall student experience.

Four key themes to consider when delivering new spaces

Ask & listen

The simple act of asking people what they want from their space has a demonstrable relationship with their satisfaction with that space (as well as giving estates teams the information that they need to plan changes). Our latest What Workers Want survey shows that across the UK & Europe, the lower the percentage of people who have been questioned about their workspace the less happy they report they are with that space. Pre and post occupancy evaluations are increasingly common in the corporate sector, and we are now seeing the evolution of apps and polling points that allow live feedback on workplace factors and user engagement and happiness. Do not be afraid to ask people what they don't like about a space, as this might be easier to fix than giving them what they think they want.

No barriers

A high performing space is one that does not put up barriers to people using it in whatever way that they find most efficient. This is true in terms of the management of the space, its configuration and its technical porosity. The ability to do different types of work and study must be accessible and convenient to all, and the buildings must not be a barrier to today's (and tomorrow's technology). Wifi access must be ubiquitous and easy to log into, and 4g black-spots must be eliminated. At an even more basic level there must be ample accessible power sockets to enable people to charge their devices. High performing office buildings are increasingly using the WiredScore rating (www.wiredscore.com) to market themselves as technologically porous and future-proofed, and we expect to see more educational estates adopting similar practices in the future.

Flexibility is key

Activity Based Working (ABW) is here to stay, as it recognises that different people work and study in different ways throughout the day. Spaces must be offered in reasonable proximity to each other to enable this, and estates must be planned to enable flexing of different types of workspace over time. ABW also has a major part to play in supporting physical and mental well-being, as it encourages people to move, as well as recognises that different personality types will be happier in different space configurations.

Identity & belonging

The spaces in which people study and work are the most visible illustration of an organisation's brand and aspirations. While the quality of teaching is the key driver of student achievement, we would argue that the quality of space is increasingly becoming the key driver of satisfaction. Furthermore, poor spaces will act as barriers to great teaching. Great spaces should also foster community by enabling people to come together formally or informally to share ideas and experiences. Students or workers who are proud of their space will be great evangelists for your brand, as well as happier and more productive.



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