

# Supporting a Student Experience of Learning within a Context of Truth, Goodness and Beauty

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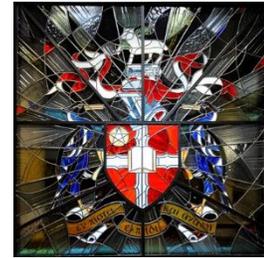
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**Abstract:** Liverpool Hope University is an ecumenical Christian University which aspires to educate the whole person in mind body and spirit. This is underlined by the motto "in faith, hope and love" which can be found on the University's coat of arms. In educating the whole person the University seeks to provide an excellent academic experience in the classroom but also to encourage and support students in providing service to others, to understand issues of social justice and to seek out new experiences which will broaden them as individuals. The University's distinctive philosophy is thus to educate in the round' – mind, body and spirit – in the quest for Truth, Beauty and Goodness. This quest is fundamental to all developments in the University. In particular the University is committed to provide its staff and students with informal and formal learning spaces which are both functional and beautiful; with the intention that the quest for truth and goodness may be enlightened by an environment of beauty. In 2012 the University undertook a redevelopment of its library spaces with these principles in mind. The result is a completely revitalised library with a range of beautiful but functional spaces. In turn the use of the library by staff and students, in terms of footfall and duration of stay, has vastly increased.

**Keywords:** Beauty, Redevelopment, Learning Spaces, Ecumenical, Informal, Learning spaces.

Liverpool Hope is an ecumenical Christian University. It was almost 170 years ago, that Hope's first founding colleges The Church of England's Warrington Training College (1844) and the Sisters of Notre Dame's Our Lady's Training College (1856) were established to provide teacher education for women at a time when further education was inaccessible for most women. A century later, Christ's College was built opposite these Colleges, and where Hope Park is today, admitting its first students in 1964. The Colleges then came together to form what is now Liverpool Hope University. The formation of Hope as an ecumenical higher education provider was supported by a renowned partnership of the then Anglican bishop of Liverpool David Shepard and the then Catholic archbishop of Liverpool Derek Worlock. The University considers itself fully Anglican and fully Catholic and justifiably claims therefore to be the only ecumenical University in Europe. Liverpool Hope University came into existence in 2005 when it received its taught degree awarding powers. It was further acknowledged by the award of research degree awarding powers in 2009. The University now has about 7000 students studying a range of undergraduate and post graduate degrees. The University's mission statement is that it aspires to

educate the whole person in mind body and spirit. This is underlined further by the motto "in faith, hope and love" which can be found on the University's coat of arms.



The University's coat of arms: stained glass in the Eden Building

In aspiring to educate the whole person the University intends not only to provide an excellent academic experience in the classroom but also to encourage and support students in providing service to others, to understand issues of social justice and to seek out new experiences which will broaden them as individuals. This is also true of the University's expectations of its staff. When joining the University all staff are expected to make a commitment to working in the light of the mission and values. Promotion opportunities for academic staff are based not only on teaching and research excellence but also on additional service to the University. All staff requesting promotion must meet all three of these categories.

To facilitate these worthy ideals the University sets out in its corporate plan how it intends to support its staff and student in such endeavours. The current corporate plan begins as follows:

*'Liverpool Hope University pursues a path of excellence in scholarship and collegial life without reservation or hesitation. The University's distinctive philosophy is to 'educate in the round' – mind, body and spirit – in the quest for Truth, Beauty and Goodness.'*

Thus the intention is not only to educate students to a high academic level but also to encourage them to aspire to join the quest for truth beauty and goodness. In order to set their path upon this quest the University thus aspires to demonstrate its own search for truth, beauty and goodness in all that it does.

In the quest for Truth, Beauty and Goodness, Hope seeks to equip its students not only with core disciplinary knowledge but also to provide a revelatory path of learning. The fundamental premise is that the possession of knowledge is not in itself an education and neither is the University the only source from which the student gets 'an education'; The key then to a University education is that it helps the student understand the world better, developing learning from humanity's mistakes and successes, from historical contexts and from collective experiences. Their path then leads to an understanding of what society thinks is true, beautiful and good.

A Hope education is, therefore, about training students how to think and then giving them a context in which to think. More specifically, about equipping them to examine new experiences and information and to make their own judgements about what is true, good and beautiful in the world. Of course, in reality, we will never truly be able to find truth, beauty and goodness and hence we are introducing our students to a life which is governed by constant self-reflection. This is, however, informed by academic knowledge and the hope that what they do can truly make a difference.

Hope's quest is to produce distinctive graduates willing to push boundaries and challenge misconceptions of today's society. This is coupled with a commitment to invest in students with potential from all backgrounds. Our students must not fear disadvantage but need to embrace their potential within and then beyond the Hope community. Within this context, the University provides all its students with the considerable benefit of having a safe space in which to practice and hone their skills of enquiry. It is particularly pertinent that this is within the City of Liverpool, whose regeneration is a living example of how understanding of the truth from collective experience and the development of an appreciation of beauty and goodness can truly make a difference.

In terms therefore, of the quest for truth, beauty and goodness, the University seeks to provide all its students and staff with a place of beauty in which to study and work, in the hope that this will then inspire them to seek for truth and goodness.

Integral in the experience of all staff and students is the provision of places to learn and study. Rather than focusing on the library, although I will return to this later, the University regards the whole campus as a learning space and works to establish all areas as such. This means that particular attention is paid whenever changes are made to ensure that the resulting spaces are appropriate places to study, play and pray.

The University corporate plan devotes one of its five sections to this aspiration as follows:

*'The University places high value on the quality of its buildings and gardens for the well-being of all its staff and students. We will maintain and enhance high quality Estates that are inspiring, aesthetically pleasing, welcoming and accessible, and provide well-equipped teaching and learning space, using the best technological solutions where appropriate. We seek to encourage our staff and students to create a real community of interaction and engagement on campus turning academic offices into studies and student study spaces into vibrant places for learning. The University provides social space and accommodation that encourage a sense of community and self-development. Our garden campuses are safe and secure spaces in which to learn, teach, research, play and pray.'*

There are many examples of this across the Hope campuses. The main entrance into the University is the Gateway Building where as you enter your eye is drawn to the wonderful sculpture "Seeds of Hope" which hangs above you. This carries the text 'in faith hope and love' in Greek and reflects the parable of the sower. This space is bright and open and is equipped with a range of computers which students use for studying and for social activities. This gives an informal learning space filled with light and noise and inspiration, which is undoubtedly a place of beauty.



'Seeds of Hope'  
sculpture in the  
Gateway Building.

It might be surprising to include the University's dining room in a piece about learning spaces, however in a refurbishment two years ago the University completely remodelled its refectory

space into a new space called 'Fresh Hope'. This is now divided into small intimate alcoves as well as open spaces with tables suitable for groups to meet. There is a contemporary coffee shop, food court and formal dining area. All of these are designed to encourage students and staff to meet and discuss both current assignments and issues of the day. It is always difficult to evaluate the success of making such changes but the fact that the financial takings over the refectory



'Fresh Hope' dining space.

counters have more than tripled and that it is now hard to find a seat suggests that this move was the right one to make. The sight of students working together in this space on group projects and discussions is now common-place. Fundamental to this development

and that of the Gateway, is a commitment and an understanding by the University that students work well in social environments and that to encourage them to stay on campus between teaching sessions we must provide such spaces for them to study in. In the UK the tradition is that students stay in on-campus accommodation during their first year of study and then move into privately rented housing in the local communities in their second and third years. This then results in a tendency to physically attend University only for the periods that they are being taught in. Hope's aspiration to build a community made up of staff and students is therefore under threat unless the campus provides spaces in which the students wish to study and socialise together. Increased opportunities for students to undertake paid employment across the University has also led to students developing deep commitments to the University and spaces, so our student workers are key advocates to their fellow students and prospective students of the strengths of the range of environments available across the campuses. In the developments I have described, and in many more across the campus, Hope is beginning to achieve its ambition, most notably generally against the tide in UK higher education.

The other point of note in this excerpt from the corporate plan is the reference to academic staff. At Hope academics are expected to be on campus during term time. This is unusual in UK Higher Education institutions. In other universities many staff are permitted to work away from the University as long as they are present for their teaching sessions. At Hope, as the corporate plan states, the academic colleagues are expected to view their offices as studies and wherever possible to conduct all of their research and administrative duties there, again contributing to the formation of the community. Again somewhat against the tide Hope has resurrected the concept of the senior common room. There are now three such common rooms at Hope providing comfortable and beautiful spaces in which all staff can meet and discuss the issues for the day. To encourage the development of community free tea and coffee are served in these spaces twice a day.

One aspect of informal learning spaces which cannot be ignored at Hope are the gardens. The University considers its grounds to be places in which to learn, teach, research, pray and play as much as any other part of the campus. The gardens have been carefully designed across both of the Hope campuses with this in mind. There are places to sit and think, places to perform and

places to work, all surrounded by careful planting with the intention of providing beauty on a year round basis. The gardens at Hope's Creative Campus are a particularly good example. With the garden, the University has set a public place of beauty into one of the poorest communities in the country, hoping it will start a regeneration of the spirit, as well as the fabric of the area. That vision has been realised in beautiful and spectacular fashion. It is also a reflection of goodness in



The Renaissance garden at the Creative Campus

that the local community are welcome in the daytime to use this space and others in the creative campus as a place of both serenity and learning. Angel Field Garden, at the heart of the Creative Campus, is a 21st century Renaissance-style garden. Forming the final piece in the redevelopment of the campus, its fountains, performance

amphitheatre, angel statue and beautiful, quiet reflective spaces are an award-winning oasis in the heart of the city. The garden is filled with quotations to inspire those who contemplate there:

*Origins is a belt of mature woodland with a circular pool and the words of St Thomas Aquinas: "Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses."*

*The Body is an apple orchard set in a wild flower meadow. On scattered stones are the words of Pied Beauty, by local poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins.*

*The Mind features a performance area surrounded by hedges, pom-pom pines and a pool surrounded by Shakespeare's immortal line: "All the world's a stage/And all the men and women merely players."*

*The Soul is a cloister adjacent to The Cornerstone building. An angel stands guard and, below, a quote from the book of Daniel: "He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him."*

The gardens are used by the whole Hope community. As soon as the British weather allows, groups of staff and students can be seen dotted across the campuses using these spaces to learn, teach, research, pray and play.

Moving from social learning environments to those involved in more formal aspects of learning, Hope has endeavoured to ensure that all classrooms and lecture theatres are equipped to a certain standard. All have interactive white-boards, internet connections and also have maximum seating capacities which the timetabling system is not allowed to exceed. This might not sound remarkable. What is remarkable is that at Hope we are working towards all our learning spaces being places of beauty. A good example is the recently completed Eden building where all classrooms spill out into a central, airy plaza which is used for social events and meeting others. This has an interesting outcome on the first floor where classrooms spill out over the plaza in a series of learning pods which are used for both formal and informal teaching.

Planning of learning spaces has to consider the impact and importance of technology to student learning. As students increasingly use their own devices e.g. laptops, tablets and smart phones the environments they work in both formal and informal need access to the internet and power, Liverpool Hope is now a wi-fi campus and this is being extended to enable visitors to access the internet through the national eduroam service.

It is of course, inevitable that such an account of learning spaces must eventually reach the library. In 1997 a number of small disparate Hope libraries were brought together to form a single new library built across the then front of the campus. It was designed well and tastefully closed off the original entrance to the St Katherine campus to create the entrance to the Library and form an enclosed courtyard. It matches extremely well the design and brickwork of the College that was built in 1930. The design was based on St Hugh's College, Oxford, which was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At Oxford, even those colleges built more recently blend in naturally with buildings that are very much older; this was the intention with Hope's new library. The new development was called the Sheppard-Worlock Library; named after the Bishop and Archbishop who supported the University so much in its ecumenical development. While blending their building with the old, the architects of the Library used more modern materials: a metal stairway and more glass facing the courtyard than in the rest of the original building.

The Library's collections contain a core print collection of over 309,000 items in a range of formats such as books, newspapers, journals, DVDs and teaching resources. Students can access and request books from either the Sheppard Worlock Library at Hope Park or its sister library at the Creative Campus or for materials not held by Hope from the British Library's inter-library loan service. The print resources are complemented by access, both on and off campus, to an extensive collection of online resources including e-books, e-journals and online reference resources.

In 2012 a review of the Library suggested that the design, although still functional, was not encouraging staff or students to linger in the library but rather to pick up what they needed and study/research elsewhere. There was also a concern that the entrance to the library did not welcome those wishing to visit or have the ambiance of a University library, rather it at first appeared to be an open office space with a large serving counter and banks of reference computers. The new design welcomes you into a smaller entrance area lined with core literary references of the University and then a first sight of books and of students studying.

The brief to the architects required more space for personal and group study, the re-ordering of the book collections and for the reserve collection, use of technology alongside the book stock, and access to print and photocopying facilities. As the designs developed the main driving force was to improve the experience of staff and students within the library in turn encouraging them to stay in the library to complete their work and to provide environments that accommodate the different learning styles and types of work being undertaken. There was also the opportunity to reassess library staff spaces and with the use of technology, especially self-service options, and

changes in working practices a substantial area that was previously staff only spaces have been converted for use by students. It is of note that the development involved an extensive student consultation which listened to students' preferences and ideas on what the library space should encompass.

The outcome has been the creation of a range of study spaces with different functions. These include silent study, quiet study and a range of group work areas from bookable group spaces to informal study pods and relaxed reading areas. Students can now book spaces using an online booking system so they don't have to come to the library to reserve a space. The informal study pods are particularly worthy of note. These are small cubby holes where groups of up to eight students can work together on projects or presentations. They are designed around a small central table with a screen to which a laptop can be connected. These have proved very popular with the student body and are keenly sought out at the start of each day. Within the new spaces there are dedicated areas for final year undergraduates and for postgraduate and staff researchers. Most importantly for this group, there are now individual study 'carrels' where senior



A study pod in the Sheppard-Worlock Library

researchers, doctoral students and staff may book lockable spaces for up to a month at a time to avoid having to put materials away each day. All resources and data banks are easily accessed from these areas

The Sheppard Worlock Library is based in the oldest part of the University, and in the most traditional of all our buildings. The entrance and its wings enclose the Graduates' Courtyard, where graduates gather each year to introduce their parents to their tutors before performing the cap-throwing ceremony at the stroke of 12:00. Whatever developments were necessary to update the library in 2012 this space had to be preserved and where possible further celebrated. As a result following the 2012 refurbishment all the windows facing the Courtyard were filled with comfortable study spaces where students can work and look out into the courtyard. Two years on it is great to report that these seats are always filled before other spaces in the library.



The Graduates' courtyard (with the library beyond).

A café has been created within the library so that students can take a break from study without too much disruption to their work. This area is discreet from the library stock to avoid damage to the materials although many students use it as a space for informal reading. The IT infrastructure has been improved. Each workstation has access to power points and there is wi-fi coverage throughout the building. The size of workstations has also been increased to enable students to comfortably use one of the 186 PCs or their own devices at the same time as the print resources. A key point is that now the workstations blend into the overall design rather than dominating it. The computer work areas does not look like a regular computer laboratory as it did previously. Instead they have been

reorganised to add to the theme of individual study spaces that revolve around a help desk where assistance can be readily provided by a technician.

In addition to the general study spaces, the new development includes a special collections Vault to house the oldest materials. Within the Gradwell Collection the library has a substantial quantity of primary recusant material from the 17th and 18th centuries; this includes devotional works, sermons, tracts, pamphlets, biblical studies and more. There is also material which needs preserving such as 16th century editions of the Fathers in Greek and Latin. The Radcliffe collection houses Missals dating from the pre-Reformation era, some 15th century European manuscript books of hours, 16th and 17th century bibles and early commentaries, hymn books and ecclesiastical music, and a large number of early printed books chiefly of liturgical and scholastic interest. This includes 26 incunabula (books printed before 1501), the manuscript holdings and the small collection of St. Aidan's early printed books. These are stored in the new vault which complies with British Museum Standards for safety and preservation and includes a monitored/supervised reading area which is also used as a teaching space for classes in Theology, History, Music, English and Art based around the collections

Over and above the beautiful spaces newly created in the library, the approach to support has also been revised. Rather than being behind closed office doors, the Faculty Librarians are based on Subject Support Points in prominent locations on the open floor. This is their normal work space, which makes them very accessible to staff and students. Additionally the design of the functional spaces incorporates colour coded floors and furnishing so that the purpose of each area is clear. Each area is accented in a different colour: Administration in magenta, Help Desk in red and Media in blue giving subtle direction to students without having a detrimental effect on the beauty of the newly refurbished space.

The outcome of the refurbishment is undoubtedly another beautiful space in which the quest for goodness and truth can be continued. A more tangible outcome is a significant increase in the footfall in the library and a remarkable increase in the length of time students and staff remain in the spaces. Rather than the library being a place where you popped in for your resources and left, it is now a space where staff and students alike spend long days. Indeed, ironically the most common student complaint is now of not being able to find a seat in the library! We are already planning an extension.