

Learning without Boundaries

Transforming education and the role of space: a panel hosted by Steelcase at the Learning and Teaching Expo in Hong Kong

Education panellists from left to right: Owen Pescod; John Mortensen; Dwayne Serjeant; Owen Tam

Ninety-six percent of chief academic officers feel they are effectively preparing students for work. Yet, only 11% of business leaders agree. This alarming statistic from a 2017 [report](#), “Learning to Work and Working to Learn,” inspired the team at Orangebox to conduct their own research exploring the role of the physical environment in closing this gap. To discuss results of this study, [The Sticky Campus and the New Dynamics of Smart Learning](#), Steelcase Education’s Owen Pescod invited a panel of experts together to talk about trends and the potential for greater collaboration between the worlds of work and education.

THE EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION

Global trends are being reflected across the Asia Pacific region. As new schools and universities open and others evolve, there is an increasing emphasis on a human-centred approach to learning. Both work and education sectors are using the physical environment responsively to meet changing student expectations and to attract talent. Technology plays a huge part in breaking down barriers but a face-to-face connection is also critical.

The Open University of Hong Kong’s (OUHK) Librarian Owen Tam shared how their library has transformed to respond to changes in the way students learn. He explained that over the past 30 years, their university has evolved from primarily a distance-learning institution to become a full-fledged university providing full-time undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as well as part-time programmes, and their library services and learning spaces have to change according to the latest and changing needs of students. Working with major stakeholders on campus, Tam and his team have led the reimagining of the library, drawing students to campus with a highly responsive approach to their needs. In addition to traditional quiet study areas, the library now has a new learning commons with vibrant collaboration zones, a café area and extended opening hours leading up to examination periods. Along with a new exhibition spaces and flexible zones to host seminars and events, the new experience redefines the library as the learning and cultural hub of the university. Tam identified space as the biggest challenge facing the transformation. “Land is the most precious thing in Hong Kong. You need to prove that you can make good use of the space provided to you,” explains Tam. The vibrant new library has certainly done that, and now there are plans to extend this new approach to other learning commons on campus.

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OWEN TAM | Librarian at Open University of Hong Kong

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR TODAY’S WORKING WORLD

Panelists discussed collaboration between education and corporate sectors to help students transition from studies to the world of work.

Dwayne Serjeant, executive director of experience design at EY, shared one forward-thinking example – the EY wavespace. It’s not a typical, traditional consulting part of the business. In this unique work environment, creative teams experiment with new methods of framing and solving problems. Serjeant explained, “We try to restructure the experience around learning to trigger creative problem solving.” The physical environment at EY wavespace is open, informal and supported by collaborative digital technology. In addition to hosting clients there, participants of the organisation’s graduate program are invited in to reflect on their experience. “They come back to wavespace to digest and disseminate what they have learned. Once people have their qualifications, you assume they are going to be good at their job. But there’s that balance to meet – apart from their job, what else are they getting out of it and how can we make the whole experience as fruitful for them as possible? In turn, we learn from them and it helps us think about how we may reapply some of that learning back into the business.

Some of the learnings Serjeant refers to have to do with the rapidly-evolving world of technology, which is critical to a new generation entering the workforce. “Often at EY, the younger people in the corporate environment are bringing the new technology to us and we try to accommodate that. But face-to-face connection is important – it requires a careful balance,” explained Serjeant. Daily 30-minute standing meetings help the team at EY wavespace make those important, personal connections.

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DWAYNE SERJEANT | Executive Director of Experience Design, EY

EDUCATION BY DESIGN

In his role as Regional Director of Education with JLL, North Asia, John Mortensen works with many new schools across the region. He has observed a broader, more flexible approach to designing education environments than in the past. Now classrooms can expand and contract to accommodate anywhere from small groups of 10 to large groups of 100 students. Space is being used as a platform and universities are tapping technology to extend beyond their physical boundaries. Mortensen referenced an Australian campus with a balmy climate that encouraged outside activities, “Their entire real estate is now a learning space with Wi-Fi enabled throughout. Whether outside or inside, students can be online and talking to each other in some manner. This extends outside the classroom and outside the campus. The whole community becomes a communication space for students and teachers.”

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JOHN MORTENSEN | Regional Director of Education with JLL, North Asia

The concept of “the sticky campus” and the desire to attract talent to schools and universities is being widely embraced. Parents and students are only part of the equation Mortensen conveyed. “There is a worldwide shortage of teachers. China needs to not only to attract, but also to retain teachers for longer periods of time. The physical environment is a strong influencer.”

There are also opportunities for greater communication between sectors to ensure educational content is keeping up with the times. “With energy and sustainability being an important part of JLL’s service provision, schools have approached us to ask for these topics to be translated into course content that can be shared with their students,” Mortensen added.

Panelists unanimously agreed that openness to change and a focus on listening and learning will help educators provide the right experience and right environments to meet the evolving needs of students and prepare them for the future of work.

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