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University College Dublin Language Centre

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Context

The Language Centre of University College Dublin was established by a decree of the President of the College in 1989. Its initial remit was to respond to the growing demand for foreign language learning within the university and the wider community. Crafted on to the existing university language laboratory, and staffed initially by means of internal College secondments, the centre developed organically within the institution. Change and progress came mainly by responding to needs and opportunities, as well as by contributing to the development of academic consensus within the college on how the Language Centre should evolve. Whilst this approach had certain drawbacks, because it delayed the process of creating new structures, it had several benefits. By achieving good results in each project, a track record of success was built up over the years. This in turn inspired confidence, encouraged co-operation, and over time produced important changes in attitudes.

Activities to Date

Eight years after its creation, the Centre is engaged in a wide range of programmes. A core activity is the provision of foreign language modules to undergraduate students across all faculties. The aim is to develop students' communication skills and enhance their prospects of academic and professional mobility. Up to 700 students receive tuition annually, and the programme receives support from the state. Another initiative was the introduction of EFL. UCD was the first university in Ireland to introduce EFL teacher education programmes and these were followed by the creation of year-round courses in ESP, EAP and general English. A testing unit was also created. In view of its importance for the academic tourism sector, the EFL project received government funding for capital development. The courses themselves are required to be self-funding. As well as teaching, the centre provides technical support to the departments of modern languages and literature. It also has an important research agenda and is engaged in a variety of EU projects.

New Building

The largest university in Ireland, UCD has grown rapidly in recent years and now has 17 000 students. Despite the size (60 hectares) of the attractively-landscaped Belfield campus just south of Dublin's city centre, many buildings are overcrowded. From the outset, it was clear that the task of expanding facilities would be an uphill struggle. Without a designated space, however, the Language Centre could not aspire to a base or acquire a profile in the university. Several attempts to get space on campus were unsuccessful. The turning point came when, in 1994, a successful application was made by the Language Centre for grant aid from the European Regional Development Fund to partially fund a building. As grant aid for a microcomputer building was secured at the same time, it was agreed that both projects would share space in the same facility. The Centre was particularly fortunate in the position chosen for the new building. It is situated at the heart of the campus, a stone's throw from the Arts Faculty Building, its spiritual home, where it also retains some facilities. As the grant-aid covered only part of the building costs, the shortfall was made up from college sources, revenues generated by the Centre itself, and a bank loan.

The timing of the grant-aid was particularly fortuitous in that, by 1994, the Centre had acquired a great deal of experience and it was possible to anticipate the needs of the future. Given its successful track record, the university Buildings Office allowed the Language Centre a high level of freedom in evolving the plans with the architects. Scott Tallon Walker, a leading firm of Irish architects, had already designed and overseen numerous buildings for the College.

An excellent working relationship was established with them from the outset. They placed a high value on the input from the staff of the centre, undertook extensive research on possible design features and invested a great deal of planning time to ensure that the available space (not as large as we had initially hoped) would be maximised. After a planning period of approximately eighteen months, the contractors moved on site on 29 February 1996. The building was completed in just over a year and the site was handed over to the college on 14 March 1997. The snagging and final fitting out of the facility is now in train and staff have already moved in.

Outline Brief

The Outline Brief and Schedule of Accommodation presented to the architects was for a Language Centre building which would be a Self-standing, customised facility linking teaching, self-access, staff and administration areas in a single integrated space. The guiding principles presented to the architects were as follows:

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Integration: Different areas of activity - small-group teaching, self-access, staff office areas, programme administration - should be spatially interlinked to allow staff and students to have extensive professional and social interchange. The "feel" of the building should be one of openness, interaction and community.

Multi-purpose: The building should provide flexible, multi-purpose space which could be adapted to suit varying needs at different times of the day, week or year. The building should also cater for small academic conferences, informal receptions and cultural events. Thus classroom space could become office or meeting space, walls should be demountable to make larger teaching rooms and it should be possible to organise these rooms in a variety of layouts.

Aesthetics: Because of its acknowledged impact on motivation, the aesthetic and comfort quality of the environment is important. Light, shape, colour and texture should contribute to a sense of elegance, refinement and style both inside and outside the building. Planting should be used as a striking visual element in the building which should incorporate an artistic element at focal points, not as an 'add-on', but as an integrated feature.

Technology: The building should incorporate best practice and be flexible to support a variety of future requirements. There will be significant operational demands on the space in terms of variety, volume and complexity. The mains supply and data cable infrastructure should allow for future developments in electronic and audio-visual equipment for teaching.

Outcome of the Brief

After several reviews of the design, the final proposal was for a two storey, granite-clad building in three modules, each floor approximately 1304 m². Computers are on the ground-floor, the Language Centre is on the first floor and both units have a separate management system. The interior of the Centre has many features including excellent use of available space, extensive natural light through roof and walls, internal wall-glazing and oak panels. Contrasting with the oak panelling is a slate grey and white colour scheme, and the building is carpeted throughout. There is an attractive light-filled entrance and the extensive circulation area allows for interaction and exchange. The Language Centre is divided into three distinct areas: (1) Teaching, Research and Development, (2) Self-Access and Materials Preparation and (3) Programme Administration.

Module 1: Teaching, Research and Development

Under this heading is included the space for teaching rooms, a sound and video studio, technical management facilities and academic offices.

Teaching Rooms

Up to ten teaching rooms of different sizes are available although these spaces can also be used for purposes other than teaching. Three rooms have demountable walls which provide for large meetings or conferences. Of different sizes, the teaching rooms have broadly similar characteristics.

Each room is equipped with a fixed wall/ceiling mounted monitor and VCR with a CTV feed in each space. Allowance has been made for speakers on most teaching walls, and in five of the teaching rooms, ceiling points have been installed for video projectors. Adequate lighting with use of dimmer switches is provided and careful attention has been paid to acoustic quality. There is a dado ducting system that allows for power and data points in appropriate places for teaching use and to allow for future flexibility. Each classroom has at least one telephone and computer link on the teaching wall. Additional power and data points are located in the floor in the area where the teacher's table is located. A white board, OHP and fixed overhead projection screen are provided. The furniture is attractive, durable and lightweight.

Sound and Video Studio

This is a flexible teaching space which functions as a sound recording and video studio, and as a teaching room. It is fully sound proofed and has been built to NC22 standard, as specified by the RTE (Radio Telefis Eireann) engineers who advised on the project. It is based on the principle of a room within a room and has a raised floor which allows for flexible cable distribution. Floor-ducting makes it possible to feed video and audio cables between the studio and the adjacent edit suite. There is an internal triple-glazed observation window allowing visual links between the two areas. When fitted out, the studio will have a video camera for class recordings, a ceiling mounted video projector and loudspeakers.

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Audio/Video Editing

The edit suite provides for the generation and preparation of sound and video material. When fitted out this room will have an S-VHS video edit suite and a separate system for the preparation of audio material. In the future, we will be reviewing the possibility of using computer-based non-linear editing systems for both audio and video.

Communications Hub

The communications hub is the centre of all the Telecommunications and computer networks of the building. All incoming signals are fed into this room, processed and then distributed to the other areas. Through the raised floor it is possible to feed cables from this area into the two adjacent spaces of the edit suite and the studio. The data cabling (computer and telephone) throughout the building is UTP Category 5. This allows for easy interchange of cable function and upgrading to an ethernet standard of 100Mbit as opposed to the present college norm of 10Mbit. A separate cabling system was implemented for the video requirements of the building.

Roof mounted satellite dishes, MMDS and UHF aerials feed signals to the hub where they are processed and either distributed directly to the self-access space or re-modulated for inclusion in the CTV network running throughout the building. The equipment in the hub is all rack-mounted with easy access to front and back. File servers and associated peripherals will be located in this space. To support the satellite dishes and other aerials on the roof, a metal frame structure was devised for flexibility and strength.

Academic Offices

Because of constraints of space, only limited office space for academic staff is located in the building. Fortunately, additional office space is available in the Arts Building close by. The Centre has one individual office and one shared office. There is also provision for multi-purpose space which function as both academic staff areas and as teaching rooms, as needs arise.

Module 2: Self-Access and Materials Preparation

Approximately one third of the usable space in the Centre is set 1-1, aside for self-access facilities and materials preparation. As can be seen from the outline plan, this area is one large open space accommodating a variety of needs, with good natural lighting and a pleasant aspect providing optimal conditions for private study. Users range from the autonomous learner (operating with or without teacher guidance), to the learner who uses self-access as support for class work. Tutors preparing classes also select materials here before moving into the preparation area for final processing. Certain facilities can also be used for group work. (It should be noted that in addition to the facilities in this area, there are additional self-access services including audio and video laboratories in the Arts building nearby.)

Self-Access

This space is sub-divided into a number of different sections, which provide opportunities for different forms of private study. A higher density of floor-ducting has been installed in 50% of this space to allow for its re-design as required in the future. At the entrance to the self-access centre, there is provision for a library security system.

The information/issue desk is situated just inside the entrance. It acts as a help desk, a place to prepare and issue materials, and from which to monitor security. Both computerised (5 positions) and hard copy catalogues are located nearby. Behind this desk is the central area for off-air recordings and the central repository for all control systems for the facilities in the self-access space.

Printed language learning and guided study materials in a range of languages are located in alcoves on open shelves. There are a total of 52 reading positions. A 16 position video laboratory will be designed for self-access and class viewing of prerecorded video tapes and satellite television. There will also be a 16-scater audio laboratory with the purpose of providing both for teaching and for private study. It will be possible to computerise this system completely by using virtual tape units. In similar fashion, the proposed computer laboratory will be designed for self-access and class use. Each computer will have full multi-media capabilities including CD-ROM, speakers and headphones.

Materials Preparation and Resource Management

The management area for language resources is located beside 'self-access'. This is divided into two main sections. There is an open-plan office space for senior library staff who manage technical staff and facilities and who provide a

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guidance and back-up service to teachers. The other area is an enclosed space for class preparation. Having browsed and selected their material in the self-access area, the teachers use this space to process it for class purposes. Facilities include five computer points, a working desk doubling as a meeting table and a 'cut & paste' zone. These two areas have been located in close proximity to allow for easy communication between librarians and teaching staff.

Module 3: Programme Administration

One enters the Language Centre by means of a spacious lobby, elegantly and comfortably fitted with soft seating, low tables, electronic notice boards and with provision for art work. Leading off this lobby is a large, open-plan, general purpose office dominating the central module. The predominant feature is a large roof light and allowance has been made for large planters in this space to introduce greenery into the building. To stress the open plan nature of the area, glazed walls are used on both sides to allow natural light to fall into the corridor and self-access area. In the office, provision must be made for a wide range of functions including accounts, test administration, student welfare and queries. Designated work-stations for senior administrative staff as well as 'hot-desking' arrangements will be in place. The reception desk is located behind a large sliding door which allows the entrance to be monitored and there is provision for more confidential areas in the space. Furniture built-ins have been specified to maximise storage space and still maintain a simple but pleasing aspect. Finally, in the vicinity of this office, there is a kitchen/staff coffee area, which can also be used as a meeting space or for informal receptions.

Final Comments

With the construction of this new facility, the Language Centre has entered a new and important phase in its development. It is interesting to observe how the physical reality of a building, particularly one located at a central and strategic point on the campus, has helped the overall Language Centre project in other ways. As well as giving it an identifiable base on campus, it has also conferred status on the project and enhanced its reputation. It is almost as if the Language Centre has only come into existence since the building has been constructed, despite the fact that the foundations were put down over eight years ago and a huge amount of work has gone on since then. It is hoped that important consequences will flow from this new development. Firstly, the quality of the work environment for students and staff will improve significantly. Secondly, the existence of the building will hasten the finalising of the academic and operational structures which are so necessary for the future development of the project. Finally, having secured an attractive and efficient environment, and having thereby attained a new standing in College, it is hoped that the centre will be able to move forward with confidence to its next phase: the enhancement of its research profile in the international arena.

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