Libraries: the most truly democratic space?

- **Have there been any major issues with balancing what students want or expect with what is possible for the library to provide?**
  It is difficult to know the answer to this at present, given the short time that the Town House was fully opened. Our research and user surveys, that were run prior to the opening, regularly indicated very practical requirements, such as more space, more group study rooms, better lit spaces, drinking fountains and more toilets (!). These 'basics' have certainly been provided. The challenge now will be what new expectations the students returning to campus will have.

- **Do you feel the new building has achieved everything that was originally intended when it was planned?**
  Again, I don't think we can fully answer that at present. To some degree, we have yet to test the building to its full extent. Building on from the answer above, it has delivered on providing our students with high quality study space that is comfortable, appropriate to their needs and well lit. However, Covid has prevented the events and social interactions that the architects had hoped for within the design and it may be some years before we will really know the answer to this.

- **In terms of changing perceptions of what the library is, do you think that until the digital divide is reduced there will be people who require the physical space and that a more digital experience won't work?**
  I don't think that the requirement for physical space is solely driven by the digital divide. Feedback has demonstrated that students actively choose to study in our library spaces, for a variety of reasons, including the facilities, the atmosphere (proximity to the physical books has been mentioned as inspiring) and study zones. Many of our students have family commitments and busy lives at home and so they value the opportunity to get away from family life and to be able to focus on their studies.

- **You highlighted the move from study spaces to learning spaces. What, if anything, are you planning to do to address this given that you will have already had your capital project? Is the building flexible enough to accommodate this change? And do you have the budget to do it?**
  The building is certainly flexible enough to accommodate the change. The designated 'project space' areas have yet to be used as envisaged and these lend themselves to being more interactive learning areas. The layout of the building is very open and therefore adaptable but also we always intended it to be open for long hours and it's possible that it will also play different roles across the day.

- **Are there any plans to continue developing physical collections within the library? How will this be incorporated into the library space?**
  Our physical collections will continue to develop, a new Collections Development Policy is in the pipeline at present. Hard to predict exactly, but while there simply aren't electronic versions of many resources, hard copy will still be required on a practical level and then there are the cost implications. Long term, the balance may change, making it unlikely that we will have the same challenges around space for stock that we had in our old library space. Worth noting that the spaces for the current stock are much more spacious and uncluttered than previously and do allow for some growth.

- **How did the university finance the project?**
  Combination of reserves and loans. In other words, it's not funded from specific donations, hence we're not called the 'Joe Bloggs Town House'!

- **Could you expand a little on what led you do drop the booking system?**

It was incredibly staff intensive and it didn't deliver either what the students wanted or potentially a Covid-secure environment. We began with fixed morning and afternoon slots and initially limited students to one slot per day. Inevitably they wanted to book multiple slots. So we had queues forming at desks with the morning students asking to re-book for the afternoon. At the end of a slot, we had a potential queue of people all leaving the building at the same time – difficult to monitor distancing! Then there was the issue of 'walk-ups' ie. people who had failed to book. We had to spend time booking them in then and there or trying to explain how to do it on their phone. Thinking ahead to term time and the undergraduate return, we couldn't think how this could operate effectively with larger numbers without students becoming very irritated by it (and staff too for that matter!)