

Future of the University Estate

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Universities are a hub bringing talented people together to create new ideas and to solve new problems. Digital is a new dimension and can help extend a university's reach without threatening the physical estate but it does require a debate about its scale and nature. What needs enhancing, what is superfluous, what could be shared? All of which has become more critical and relevant as we navigate our way out of the COVID pandemic.

Nicky Fairbairn, a partner in the Education team at DAC Beachcroft, an international law firm, considers five filters for decision making that she considers to be important. This is a summary of the address she gave in Built Environment's Estates Strategy Conference in November 2020.

PROPOSITION

Many universities, through their investment in the built environment, send a clear message to the students they want to attract in the future. Clarity of what the university is offering generally, and to whom, is core to the future real estate conversation.

PARTNERSHIP

Leading universities understand that the future depends on welcoming a wider world into the campus. That may be through partnerships with the private sector; relationships with individual companies to help develop life-long learning for their employees and long term investment into the university estate.

Universities also understand their symbiotic relationship to the future of the local community. The partnerships with the local authority and public sector partners like the NHS have demonstrated their importance in regenerating towns and cities. Understanding how the university fits into the wider and evolving economic plan and the local authority's vision will remain critical considerations.

PROVISION

Students are sophisticated consumers and expect a level of personalisation and interactivity. The traditional lecture theatre isn't delivering this any better than the video screen and I think that many will be gradually repurposed. However what COVID-19 has proven is that you can't beat being in the same physical room for some situations and that we crave real company. Virtual reality is very exciting but won't entirely replace a lab for collaborative experiment and research. Technology is evolving so quickly future proofing and flexibility will be a critical part of all estate decisions.

PERFORMANCE

Buildings, and the associated institution, will be judged by a new and increasingly demanding set of performance indicators. Sustainability remains a key driver for the estates of the future and one that may have been slightly "parked" during COVID..

PROTECTION AND PROJECTION

Universities also have a responsibility to protect the country's academic and architectural heritage. The Estates team is charged with this guardianship, but can also use it to project a vision of the future of the university, and create new ideas in the education sector.

For all these drivers, the Estates team has to be a connected part of the leadership team, to ensure aligned decision making.

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