

More than the sum of our parts

How three universities share the Drill Hall Library

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Drill Hall Library exterior – the library is reputedly the longest in Western Europe

The question I get asked most often about the Drill Hall Library is: 'Doesn't it get really complicated with three universities involved?' and the answer is honestly and simply: 'Yes'.

...But I always follow up by suggesting that because every library is an economy of scale, and because every librarian is trained to find a way to put people in touch with information, the library staff at the Drill Hall just rise to the challenge. Perhaps we're now taking it for granted; ten years ago, when the library opened, it was a bold step into uncharted waters, but now it's an integral part of three universities' worlds.

At the Medway towns in North Kent there is a university campus for around 7,000 students who belong to the University of Greenwich, the University of Kent or Canterbury Christ Church University. The three universities share the overall location, but carefully arrange they to avoid undue academic overlap or competition. They mostly use their own offices, teaching spaces, labs, car parks, ID cards and systems. There are, however, some areas of deeper integration and the jewel in the partnership crown is undoubtedly the Drill Hall Library.

Students and staff from all three universities share the Drill Hall, in the same way that students at the University of London share Senate House Library. All physical resources are accessible to all students, from the books through to the PCs and even the library staff. Anyone can borrow any item, sit at any desk or use any laptop or PC. All students feel at home here, and the library retains an independent branding that ensures the Drill Hall is uniquely identifiable as common ground for all Medway students, but still part of all three universities' infrastructure.



Students from all three universities share the same services and study spaces, and can be seen here with a member of staff using the iPad catalogues

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So what makes this arrangement work? Let's look at the factors at play:

Robust governance

The partnership came about through intensive negotiations, and you can imagine how complicated were the Joint-Venture Agreement and subsequent conversations about budgets, reporting lines and decision-making bodies. That these were achieved, and that to this day they underpin the helicopter-view of governance whenever issues arise, is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the Drill Hall Library works. The closer our helicopter gets to the ground, however, the more difficult things look. Pro-VCs being on the same page gets us a long way, but we need more than that to explain how things don't grind to a halt every time one of the partners has a new idea.

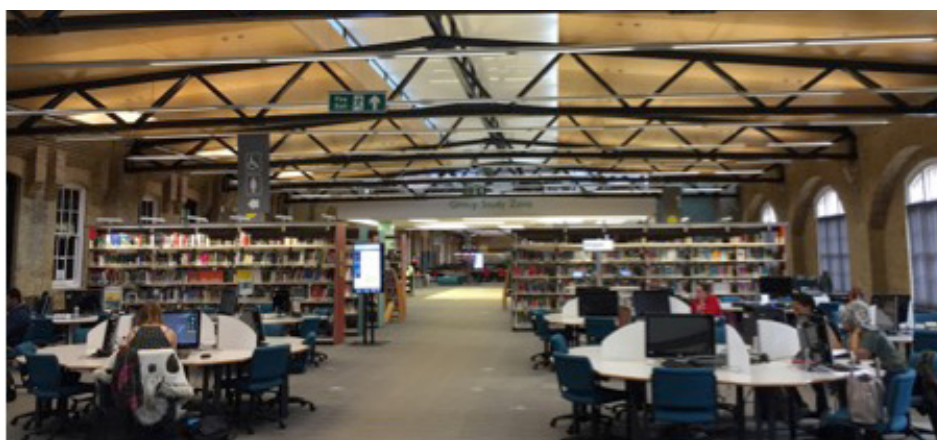
Willingness to be flexible

The word 'flexible' appears in all our job descriptions in the Drill Hall, but that they should probably also include 'patient', 'unflappable' and 'able to smile on the surface whilst grinding teeth invisibly' wouldn't be a mile off. What we're blessed with, though, are three partners who recognise how we fit into their services. We love it when we get invited to partner meetings (even though it means going to three lots). Our hearts sing when we hear 'we would like to change this thing but we wanted to talk to the Drill Hall about it first'. We've proven to ourselves that we can solve thorny problems and that if we work together in partnership, and if we're all prepared to seek solutions rather than point out our differences, we can maintain the quality service we strive for.

Having flexible staff and flexible partners means it's possible to pull this operation off. But it doesn't quite explain why we should even be trying. Gladly, we never find ourselves asking: 'what's the point?'

Technology made this possible

From day one, the Drill Hall has had its own IT team, finding technical solutions and supporting them for shared, mutual benefit. Early on there were several critical issues that needed a technical solution. In each case, a solution was found that ensured the end-user experience would be consistent and of comparable quality to the service a student would get at the main campus of each individual partner. Innovations such as Eduroam made wifi access straightforward for our users, as did the development of a shared desktop. I firmly believe that if the Drill Hall had Kent-only PCs or Greenwich-only laptops, then the spirit of sharing the space would have been fatally undermined. We've even found ways to run the circulation, fines, inter-library loans and the like in ways that are straightforward for all those accessing the services.



Drill Hall Library interior – the library has three zones: silent, quiet and group, with over 400 PCs spread across them

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There is a hidden impact behind the scenes though – whilst most higher education librarians would recognise the services we offer, I think many would be surprised by how we do things behind the scenes. For example, because we're in the overlapping bit of the universities at Medway Venn-diagram, we're the only library in our network of eight where you can return any book. It takes a lot of different vans with different coloured boxes and labels to make it work, but it's worth it.

Another quirk is that because of our complex systems set up, the University of Kent provides us with our own versions of two systems – Talis Aspire for reading lists and Primo for discovery. Both are set up to deliver a quality service to Medway students without any compromise on account of our unusual technical set-up. Because we share our LMS with Greenwich, their Primo works well for us already. It's a great example of how we'll improvise to maintain the quality of service.

Economy of scale

If each university ran their own smaller libraries, perhaps in separate buildings within yards of each other, each could deploy their own staff, policies and procedures in comfortable isolation, but would the managers of those libraries be able to run services comparable to those in the Drill Hall? It would be almost impossible, and the business case for running 24/7 services, for example, would be much harder to make. When it comes to getting attention, buy-in, funding or even recognition, size does seem to matter, and the Drill Hall punches above its weight on behalf of each institution because it's really operating on behalf of all three together.

That's the real trick to the Drill Hall – each university gets a high-quality library and information service that meet the needs of their student body whilst at the same time investing less than they would if they wanted to run anything like the same service themselves.

Unique identity

This partnership makes the Drill Hall a unique place to work. Perhaps a topic for another article should be about the Drill Hall's other unique features – it is a Grade 2 listed building, part of a former naval barracks that holds over 100,000 volumes and 600 study spaces in one enormous room, about ten times longer than it is wide and over 200m from one end to the other.

The Drill Hall Library also remains a unique example of a three-way collaboration in higher education librarianship and information technology provision, but it's a model that many could learn from.

Not just a library

Though most of the campus is identifiably a part of one of the three partners' offerings, there are also some other notable examples of collaboration. A shared teaching block, known as the Pilkington Building, houses lecture theatres and seminar rooms for use by Kent and Greenwich students. The Drill Hall team manages the audio-visual resources and network used in those rooms, as well as the shared teaching rooms that are within the library building.

The Greenwich and Kent Student Unions also share a presence here, represented as GK Unions. It means that Medway can put together far more societies and sports teams than if each university went it alone.

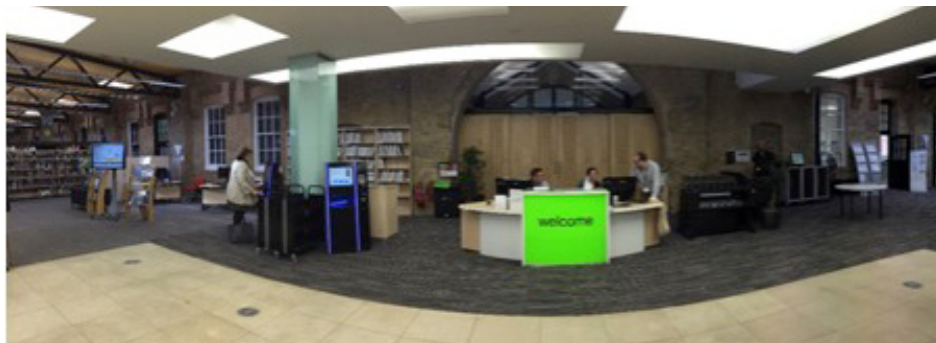
<insert image: PuplettDrill Hall Library Welcome Desk.jpg>

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Drill Hall Library Welcome Desk – all library and IT enquiries can be handled here

The future

Sharing a physical space, co-funding the services and finding ways to work together have been the themes of the last ten years. The next ten will be identified by the way we share digital services, and the three universities are exploring another ground-breaking arrangement – sharing services through a unified Library Management System. The potential of such an arrangement is huge, and the potential for positive disruption to many of our sewn-together solutions is both exciting and intimidating. We can only consider this bold step because of the success of the last ten years.

The Drill Hall was opened by David Miliband on 13 Feb 2006. In February 2016 we're going to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the opening with a party. In the summer of 2016 we'll then see the biggest development at Medway for students since our inception, with the opening of the new Student Hub. This is being created from the shell of the former naval barracks swimming pool, in a similar way to how the library was fashioned out of a Drill Hall Shed ten years ago.

The Hub will be for all Medway students – another accessible, shared space designed to answer student needs, and right for this unique campus. The values that the hub will rely on to succeed are the values of the Drill Hall Library, and that is why it will thrive as we have.

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