REPORT
on the
SELF ACCESS CENTRE
at
UNITEC

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INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the background of self-access learning, describes the situation of the existing Self-Access Centre at UNITEC, highlights the characteristics of the leading Self-Access Centres in New Zealand and around the world, and makes recommendations regarding the future development of the Centre at Unitec in the areas of physical layout, systems, resources, services, and staffing. It presents a range of options regarding the future location of the SAC, with the implications involved in each.

BACKGROUND

The Concept of Self-access

Self-access refers to the organization of learning materials and equipment to make them directly available to the learner. It may include 'open learning' or 'independent learning', as well as teacher-directed learning, either in person or at a distance. It not only provides the student with access to materials, but also to guidance and feedback, as well as the opportunity to have input into all aspects of the provision and use of the learning materials. To sum up, in the words of Benson in Cotterall (1995:65), "autonomy represents a goal, self-directed learning a means of achieving it, and self-access an environment within which it can be achieved."

Rationale for Self-access

The rationale for self-access learning has gained momentum over the last thirty years as findings on individual learning styles, developments in technology, and changes in course delivery have highlighted the value of and provided the means for a more student-directed mode of learning. Increasing numbers of institutions around the world now incorporate specific facilities for independent learning, and UNITEC is among those. As Jones (1995:228) asserts, "no modern language school can afford to be without them."

It is important to note however, as Miller (1992) points out, what a Self-access Centre is not:

- a system for students to learn a language without teachers or guidance of some sort
- a facility that automatically makes students into independent learners
The Existing Self-access Centre at UNITEC

The Self-Access Centre was first established in 1989, and is now an integral part of the School of Languages. The School is committed to making the materials and resources of the SAC available to all staff and students of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and eventually to as wide a user base as possible. To this end, the School has commissioned this report into the current state of the facility, the latest in facilities elsewhere, and the possibilities for expansion and further development of our SAC within the Faculty. We aim to be at the forefront of self-access learning facilitation and now is the time to move into the next phase towards achieving that goal.

The present SAC has made great progress in the nine years it has been operating. It has acquired a wide variety of resources and a collection of hardware for their utilisation, developed a range of organisational systems and services, including the innovative Peer Tutoring scheme, and attracted a dedicated staff. However, it has operated under increasingly cramped conditions, on a tight staffing budget. The consequences of this have been that it is yet to realise its full potential.

Extensive surveys of Faculty students and staff have shown that there are large numbers of potential users who are either ignorant of the SAC's existence, unaware that it is a facility for them, sceptical of its usefulness, unmotivated by its current resources, or actively discouraged from making use of it by its noisiness and lack of space. It is currently only partially integrated into a minority of courses, and has no ongoing, in-depth input from academic staff.

User orientation is limited by pressure of time and the lack of a range of induction systems available to users. Resources are accessible only in as much as users already know what they need, where it is, and how to use it. There is thus much scope for the development of comprehensive indexes, cataloguing systems and supplementary materials to assist students in getting the most out of the resources.

There is little in the way of guidance or feedback available to students, due to the existing staffing arrangements and lack of training. Peer Tutoring fulfills an important role in facilitating interaction between native and non-native speakers, but it is limited in its pedagogical brief. The present full-time staff are fully engaged in administrative tasks and the practical aspects involved in the day-to-day running of the Centre.
Users tend to work in isolation, whereas one of the innovative roles of a SAC is to facilitate collaborative learning and user interaction. This can be achieved in a number of ways: through small tutorial groups, special interest groups, workshops, language exchange services, and email and Internet access. These can only run with a commitment of trained staff, relevant resources and the development of appropriate support systems, with the funding to ensure their continued provision.

Finally, the profile of the SAC has been somewhat low, and this needs to be remedied by establishing a visionary leadership, to ensure a clear sense of mission, and to develop a policy and job descriptions. This needs to be supported by focussed marketing, a SAC website, and ongoing contacts with other state-of-the-art facilities. These would ensure that not only staff and students within the School of Languages and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences benefit from all the SAC has to offer, but that the wider UNITEC and Auckland user communities are able to access it - and from there, just as the childhood 'ripple-effect' rubric goes, New Zealand and the world.

The time has now come to expand and develop a truly accessible and fully-integrated facility which combines greater physical space with specialist staff, highly-developed systems and state-of-the-art equipment. With such a facility the needs of students and members of staff, as well as members of the public could be met. The status of these users would range from undergraduate to postgraduate, part-time to full-time, onsite or offsite. Their focus could be any of the following:

- students of English as a Foreign Language
- students of English as a Second Language
- students of International Languages
- students of Te Reo Maori
- trainee teachers of languages

The SAC could be used for the following:

* compulsory coursework
* training in learning skills and strategies
* independent study and research
* tutorial guidance
* distance learning
* networking with other users
* access to the latest learning technologies
As Lonergan (in Esch 1994:122) points out, "...learners today...no longer present themselves [if they ever did] in discrete groups each with homogeneous needs. There are now many diverse sets of learners, ...with many different learning objectives. Using a Self-access Learning Centre meets some of the logistic problems of catering for this diversity. Cotterall states (1995:63) that the popularity of Self-access Centres can be traced to the recognition of principles of learner-centredness, acceptance of the diversity of learners' needs and, more pragmatically, to the necessity of economising on teaching resources.

CONCLUSION:

In order to take the Self Access Centre into the next century, the following recommendations must be implemented.

It is essential to move to larger facilities in order to accommodate language students from other faculties, as well as Te Reo students, International language students, and trainee language teachers. The facility must have separate areas to cater more effectively for students' needs. Option A could be put into action now with a view to proceeding to Option C (a centralised location for all of UNITEC). Option B would be better to pursue if it is decided to keep the services of the SAC within the Faculty.

The appointment of academic staff to drive the development of the SAC is paramount, as is the need for on-going professional development, research, and communication with all languages staff. Students must be assisted by a range of support services, including thorough needs analysis and induction, clear pathways, individual counselling, monitoring and evaluation. These are essential if we are aim to lead in language provision by offering a range of learning options, using up-to-date technology, and ensuring that our students receive quality education.

Questions such as who the SAC should serve at UNITEC (all language students on campus/ Faculty of Arts and Social Students/ School of Language students only); what range of services we aim to provide (open/distance learning as well as course work complementation); whether any current facilities should be included as part of the SAC (current language laboratories/computer labs); and how to fund such a centre (through contributions from all schools involved/charging students), will all need careful consideration. Hong Kong and Australia have both had generous government funding to set up and develop their centres, and the wide range of purposes they are able to serve reflects this.
Finally, the recommendations included in this report are the results of careful investigation of not only the theory and research into self-access learning, but also on close observation of the key characteristics of leading SACs in operation. These recommendations are based on what is proven to work. Let us learn from others’ lead, so that we may take the lead in the future.
KEY CHARACTERISTICS of thirteen Self Access Centres visited in New Zealand, Australia and Hong Kong.

PHYSICAL:

Entrance:
* clearly-defined entrance area
* welcoming signs and hours visible
* shelving for students’ bags
* inviting and attractive especially around entrance and common areas (open doors, bleeper security, plants, posters, noticeboards, induction video with monitor, magazines)

Plan:
* clear signage and space to move between areas
* glass walls round half of room to enhance lighting and assist security
* feeling of spaciousness: space between areas, lower listening booths
* clear differentiation between parts of room through use of shelving and space
* purpose-built furniture
* rooms to produce audio tapes and videos
* separate rooms for group conversation
* separate computer rooms (for CALL and Internet/email access)
* counselling area -open but private e.g. in a quiet corner
* comfortable sitting/reading area with coffee table, magazines, board games
* views of green/open areas
* table near entrance for today’s newspaper, current periodical (eg.Time), newest books and newly-developed task sheets
* stand for current newspapers and magazines
* whiteboard for student questions, notices etc
* small lending library plus SAC permanent resources

Security and Cost Recovery
* resources catalogued and lent under library Oasis system
* security bleeper
* $5-$50 bond for borrowing for the term - no certificate if resources not returned
* students leave ID cards at main desk when using portable equipment/special materials
* students leave bags by door

STAFFING:
* full time academic staff (motivated, creative, with ESOL qualifications) driving development
* administrative staff
* SAC technician
* teaching staff involved: rostered in with class; 1:1/small group counselling/advising (with visible timetable so sts can choose who and when); team resource development; SAC supervision
* librarian to set up catalogue
* teaching staff with an interest in computers given hours in SAC to assist with CALL and buy software
* availability of technical staff to maintain equipment
* use of immigrant teacher to assist students in SAC
* use of differently-abled person to do routine tasks
* full timer aware of student needs who can therefore give assignments to teaching staff timetabled in to make specific resources
* regular SAC staff development: two weeks orientation; weekly meetings; on-the-job; workshops; seminars
SYSTEMS:

Organisation/provision of resources:
* index/catalogue: 3 types- computer database; hard copy files; lists of useful materials
* organisation of resources clear because of readable signs, labels, dots, according to level, skill, topic, course
* resources for specific courses in one place; or folder at desk for a particular course
detailing all resources useful for that course
* teaching staff rostered in to develop resources
* teaching staff contribute tapes and videos used in class (foreign languages)
* administrative help with typing resources
* trolley/baskets for students to return materials to
* clear headings to see what is there and good signage making students feel welcome
* students provided with computer discs, scrap paper and pencils on request

Induction
* multi-media (audiotape, booklet, video tape, computer software, guided tour, quiz)
* materials for training in autonomous learning
* guidelines for tutorials

Ideas to assist student learning:
* having ESOL staff available to help is appreciated
* staff contact details displayed: office/SAC hours, extension, email, fax
* learner advice sheets on areas of language study
  (see Internet http://lc.ust.hk/~sac/advice/S1.htm)
* learner contracts
* learner portfolios/diaries/logbooks
* file for each student - different colour for levels with cover sheet, resources for that level; and record of learning for student to complete. Files kept in cabinet in room.
* general learner pathways on display eg. Are you interested in...? Go to...
* students use the computer catalogue and course resource folders a lot to find resources

Services
* 1:1 tutorials
* small-group guided learning scheme
* book swap (popular paperbacks e.g. Tom Clancy novels)
* Internet links for subject areas/topical/general/language learning information
* language exchange/conversation opportunities (students advertise through noticeboard)
* students matched via email with students of English/other languages overseas
* workshops
* special interest groups for those wanting job interview practice, news discussions, karaoke, film discussions, writing workshops etc.

Accessibility of materials:
* student access to online catalogue (eg SACCESS) and hard copy index
* booking system for computer use, discussion rooms and counselling
* laminated instructions on desk/wall beside equipment
* display signs placed upright on desks/tables for ease of reading
* area/skill/topic/level/course/language signs and labels
* CD Rom covers on display, with index
* noticeboard including display covers of new and recommended materials, map of SAC, photos of staff
* all materials could be borrowed (use of library system set up by librarian; or bond for term)
* booking systems for use of computers/seminar rooms/portable equipment/1:1 and group tutorials/workshops/special interest groups, with sign-up
folders held at main desk
* clear instructions on packages

**Evaluation / monitoring:**
* student numbers monitored through swipe card at entrance
* materials packs with sticker on outside for sts to tick if problems with this resource
* student use evaluated through online feedback system
* online SAC materials evaluation system

**MATERIALS:**
* advice sheets
* practice books
* audio cassettes
* laser discs (with subtitles)
* multimedia programs (CD Roms)
* magazines
* Internet
* music CDs with lyric sheets
* readers & readers with tapes
* worksheets
* reference books
* videos
* computer programs (CALL)
* newspapers
* email
* satellite TV
* games

**Recommended materials:**
* Behind the News (resource materials and activities based on Aust. news)
* BBC magazine and tapes
* magazines and newspapers kept for staff doing materials development to go through and produce activity sheets from.
* laser discs (longer lasting than videos; available with subtitles)
* videos: Focus on ... series(ABC News ESL Video Library: Regents/Prentice Hall)
  Zoom In series  (Oxford English Video)
  International Business English
  TV English  (British Council BBC English) series
  Culture Watch series (ABC News ESL Video Library)
* multimedia: CNN Newsroom Global View
  Power Japanese  (BayWare Inc.)
  Oxford 3-in-1 Bilingual Dictionary (French/Spanish/German)
  Electronic Business Letter Writer (OUP)
  Telephone Talk 1&2 (Libra Multimedia Ltd)
  Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?  (Game:Broderbund)
  Heinemann  Readers
* email Writing software package: Daedalus (students can respond instantly in wholeclass lab setting)
* ELT materials agency: CELTIC (UK-based, on Internet)
* staff resources on autonomous learning
EQUIPMENT / TECHNOLOGY:
* free use of email and Internet
* professionally-produced induction video and software (with hypertext)
* range of online programs for self-diagnosis of level, needs analysis, catalogue, materials evaluation
* photocopier for limited student use
* laser disc players
* IBM and Mac computers (with small mirrors attached for pronunciation practice)
* TVs and VCRs
* whiteboards
* pinboards
* desks/tables and chairs
* filing cabinets
* video camera
* portable radio/cassette player/recorder
* headphones
* microphones
* overhead projector
* SAC Website
* potential for video conferencing, computer networking etc
* potential for development of virtual SAC with chatrooms

GENERAL:
* clear mission statement and policy
* clear job descriptions
* SAC staff contribute to staff/ student magazine
* staff induction to SAC
* a strong ethos of respecting learners as being responsible for their own learning
* an environment of respect and care for SAC resources
* regular communication with other departments via email/leaflets/notices re materials/seminars etc. of interest to staff/students.
* promotional activities incl. opening ceremony/activities (with media coverage); open days
* inclusion of the SAC on campus tours during Orientation Week
* on-going liaison with national/international SAC special interest groups
* SAC users' committee/ advisory group
* professionally-designed and -published SAC booklets, flyers, bookmarks
* open to the public, with charge to use resources (teach yourself a language etc)
LOCATION

In acknowledgement of the current situation at UNITEC regarding spaces available, it seems wise to consider several options for the location of the new, improved SAC. These range from the one involving greatest compromise of the vision to the one in which it can be most fully realised.

Option A: Current location, with modifications

This would at best be a short-term solution. Due to the constraints of the current building configuration and its uses, the modifications to the current SAC would be limited. To have any advantage, the modifications would have to include incorporation of the corridor space, as well as current lecturer office, classroom and student consultation spaces (the glass room and the connecting corridor to the courtyard).

Floor plan:
Implications:

- gain of approximately 250 m²
- gain of easier access to Language Lab
- gain of more centrally-located main SAC entrance
- gain of more administrative space
- loss of classroom space
- loss of lecturer office space
- loss of Applied Skills glass room
- loss of some access to Lecture Theatre
- loss of some independent access to courtyard
- loss of some independent access to Language Lab

Cost:

To be estimated.
Option B: Building 170 Student Cafeteria with additions

This would involve extensions to the exterior of the current building with the possible future addition of existing classroom and storeroom space at basement level. The corridor may or may not be retained, depending on the level of independent access to Mac/PC/Language Labs required. Major modifications would also have to be carried out to remove some kitchen features (cool store, some bench space, etc), while retaining basic kitchen facilities for servicing the staff cafeteria.

Floor Plan:
Implications:

- gain of, at minimum, approximately 125 m²
- gain of more open, flexible space, with room for expansion
- gain of proximity to or integration with Mac/PC/Language Labs
- possible retention of through-access
- retention of lecturer office space
- retention of Applied Skills glass room
- more scope for natural lighting
- loss of Student Cafeteria
- loss of some kitchen space and services

Cost:

To be estimated.
Option C: **Stage 3 of UNITEC Capital Works program**

This would be a purpose-built facility and would thus incorporate the latest in ergonomic and technological capability. It would be centrally located, in the vicinity of the Library and Te Tari Awhina, with resulting high visibility, fuller integration, and greatest accessibility for users. Both aforementioned facilities have expressed support for closer liaison between themselves and the SAC, while acknowledging the need to retain the special character of the SAC as a facility in its own right.

**Floor Plan:**

To be advised.

**Implications:**

- least compromise of the vision
- gain of higher profile for SAC campus-wide
- retention of space in Building 170 for other uses
- greatest potential for later upgrading of technology
- increased security (no need to open Building 170 on weekends)
- duplication of computing and listening equipment
- loss of immediate accessibility for School of Languages students

**Cost:**

To be estimated.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Benson, P. (1994). Self-access systems as information systems: questions of ideology and control, in Gardner & Miller (see below).


