

Going with the flow

Students returning to Merthyr Tydfil College in September can expect a brand new building with state-of-the-art catering facilities. Robert Read, FCSI foodservice consultant and owner of Robert Read Associates, talks to EDUcatering about the work currently underway

Students have a lot to look forward to when they start the new academic year at Merthyr Tydfil College in September. The brand new building – which stands alongside the existing site – is nearing completion and will offer a first class learning experience and the largest range of A Levels in South-East Wales.

At the heart of the building is the catering facilities and Robert Read of Robert Read Associates has been on hand to ensure that the new outlets are ideally suited to the modern customer.

Read's commercial background has certainly helped to focus on the demands of the modern young customer and his knowledge and experience of the commercial sector has helped to adapt the new first floor restaurant and ground floor atrium café to cope with volume and the latest trends.

Keen to move away from the traditional idea of a canteen style offering, he says: "People might not like the move towards grazing and snacking, but it's here to stay. So we've tried to make it a bit more modern and into the way it is actually going to be used."

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While a traditional servery is always needed, the new catering facilities had to pay close attention to the increasing grab and go market.

"You can look at any sector and see that the trend is towards snacking," he remarks. "And this includes all-day snacking as well, not just eating at 1pm." Read highlights trends of less formality, snacking and, perhaps most importantly, flexibility, that are moving into schools and colleges.

Flexibility was a large focus of the project and so Read was eager to create a space that could easily deal with flows of customers and handle volume at different times of day. "If you do handle successfully the 'snack type of people' then by definition you help to resolve the historical queues at the main servery," he says.

Indeed, this was one of the first hurdles when he came to the project in November 2011, when the Project Team had ended its working relationship with another catering consultancy. Read was introduced to the project by John Evans, consultant project manager at Davis Langdon, and his first task was to produce a new, more flexible design for the space that was on budget.

Of biggest concern was the main servery area. On looking at the original plans, the main entrance was taken up with service risers and ducting, blocking the view into the space. The previous consultants had been told that this couldn't be moved, but Read was insistent that the problem could be solved.

"We set about working with the project team and I have to give John Evans his credit here because he's very practical and we moved the ducts out of the way having been told they couldn't be relocated. You can still see them in the seating area, but it opened up the whole



servery visually and we could put more till points in, giving more flow."

There are two aspects to designing a space that has ease of flow. One is future proofing – the college will be able to cope with increased numbers in years to come and adapt as trends change. Secondly, it helps to manage current peaks in demand and in turn reduce staff costs.

"The servery has been designed so that it can be operated with just one side open and customers still have access to everything. When the main lunchtime flood happens each day it can then double up and there are two extra tills. The site needs to work when it's quiet and at peak."

Because of its central location at the entrance to the building, the atrium café has faced some hurdles and Read explains that there are some fundamental issues that the team are still discussing, such as how much space the site should take up of the main reception area.

Behind the scenes in the back of house area, Read says there are some "nice little touches", but overall the college's catering staff will step inside in September and find many standard pieces of equipment that they are used to using. Much of the new designs are being installed to make the lives of caterers and customers easier.

The area is currently in the fit-out stage, carried out by C&C Catering Equipment, and there are some items that Read is particularly excited about. One is the Circa-Trak tray clearing unit from Trak Hupfer. "I hate tray cleaning and mess in public areas," he remarks. "We've all seen these big tray cleaning units that take up one wall. What I liked about [the Circa-Track] unit was it was really small. All you have on the student side is a hole in the


wall with half the unit rotating around. We have a one-way glass window next to it so the people in the pot washing area can see through to the other side, but the public can't see in.

"The other problem with tray clearing is a lot of purchases nowadays don't have trays. With a coffee or grab and go sandwich you don't have a tray, so you have nowhere to put your waste. The unit has a tray section, but there are also rotating shelving units to put freestanding items on."

Elsewhere, Adande refrigeration units have been installed to offer caterers yet more flexibility. Apart from being incredibly energy efficient, Read says, the ability of switching between refrigerated and frozen is a huge advantage for foodservice sites.

"Nine times out of 10 when we design a place we know what we're going to do, but we don't know the final menus. A classic item would be chips. Are they going to be frozen, ambient or chilled? I probably don't know, so it's useful from that perspective. And it's also about future proofing. Even if they do it one way now, that's not to say it's what they'll do in five years' time with a new chef."

Also offering flexibility is a facility for hot snacks. "What 'hot snacks' really means is there's some flexibility," Read says. "And the café still has the capability to do traditional meals. We are trying to get a blend of the two."

The catering facilities at the new Merthyr Learning Quarter are going to be a real pull for students and keep them on site, and through simple design elements there should never be an issue of the type of food on offer or endless queues in years to come. 

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As a group of over 1,000 foodservice experts worldwide, with many members working in the public sector, FCSI has the specialist sector knowledge and industry insight required to deliver innovative, commercial and sustainable solutions to the sector's business challenges.

The professional membership is made up of consultants who focus on all aspects of the catering industry and in particular the public sector, business strategy and commercial kitchen design. FCSI allied members are professional foodservice or equipment suppliers that work alongside our consultants to successfully deliver projects.

Our members' areas of expertise include; foodservice strategy development, business planning, commercial contract tendering and design and equipment solutions across all sectors of the industry.

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