Evaluation of Booth Street East Flexible Learning Spaces

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MANCHESTER
1824
The University of Manchester

Flexible
Learning

BSE Flexible Learning Space Evaluation

Hyflex Space   G.08
Teaching space, which contains advanced A/V kit which enables synchronous teaching sessions to be delivered in person and online at the same time.

Tech Free Space   G.07
Teaching space for discussion style sessions and a versatile space for hybrid learning where students can come to sit and relax in-between teaching sessions.

VR Suite   1.10
The VR pods have been specially designed to facilitate multiple users engaging in VR activities safely. There are 12 Sentira^{XR} VR Headsets available in the room

What

Evaluating the three key learning spaces (Hyflex, Tech Free and VR Suite) that were created and support by the Flexible Learning Programme. The spaces were deigned to provide learners with greater flexibility, prepare them for a digital future and building an infrastructure fit for the future. We aimed to add more spaces on campus to innovate and trial new approaches which we did via the three spaces.

Why
- To gain insight into how these spaces are currently used.
- To understand the value provided by our flexible learning spaces.
- To improve how we communicate the suitability and availability of these flexible spaces.
- To facilitate more varied and wider utilisation of these spaces for teaching and learning.
- To inform our future estates strategy.
- To determine the need for additional specialised spaces (e.g., HyFlex, VR suites) across campus.

How
- Focus Groups
- Survey's
- Usage & Booking Data

When

Teaching Staff Focus Groups
June – July 2025

Student Focus Groups
October – November 2025

Key Findings from Academic Focus Groups & Survey's

Over 300 students utilised the VR Space, supported by Tony Payton and the **SentiraXR** team.
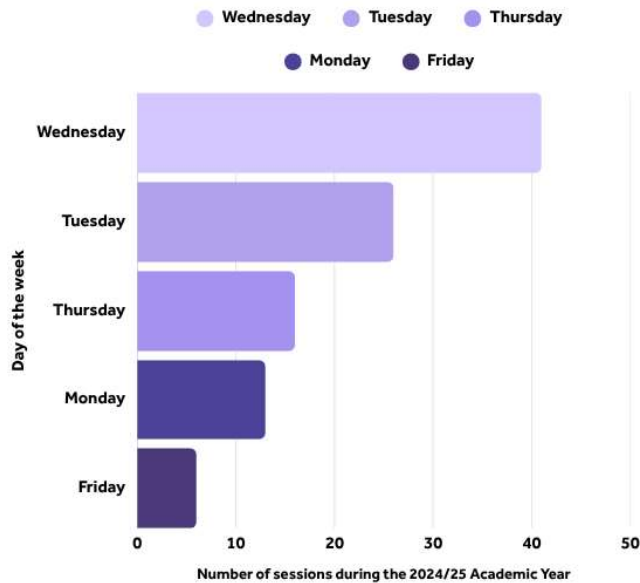
Physical design of the spaces, such as soundproof pods, flexible layouts, and modern aesthetics **improved both teaching and learning experiences**.

These environments fostered **deeper learning** through **self-paced practice**, **repetition**, and **collaborative activities**, especially in VR and hybrid settings.

The spaces significantly **enhanced student engagement**, **confidence**, and **satisfaction** by providing **supportive, immersive**, and **low-pressure environments**.

Understanding the Occupancy of FLP Learning spaces

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Hyflex & Tech Free Usage

Wednesday · Tuesday · Thursday · Monday · Friday

(Bar chart: Day of the week vs Number of sessions during the 2024/25 Academic Year)
- Wednesday
- Tuesday
- Thursday
- Monday
- Friday

Wednesday is the busiest day, *accounting for 40% of all sessions.*

Average group size of ~28 *suggests moderate occupancy, the room's capacity is 36.*

*Our **Tech-Free Space** has only seen 7 bookings, indicating **underutilisation**. Yet, 3 bookings for filming and 3 alongside the HyFlex room demonstrate its adaptability for a range of activities beyond its primary design*

On Average, Each HyFlex & Tech-Free Session Lasts **3 Hours**

Hyflex & Tech Free usage over 2024/25 academic year

(Line chart: Number of Sessions vs Month, Sept '24 to Jul '25)
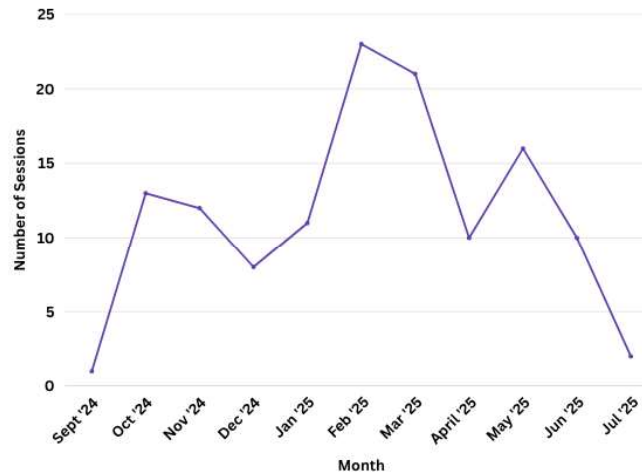
Total number of sessions: 102
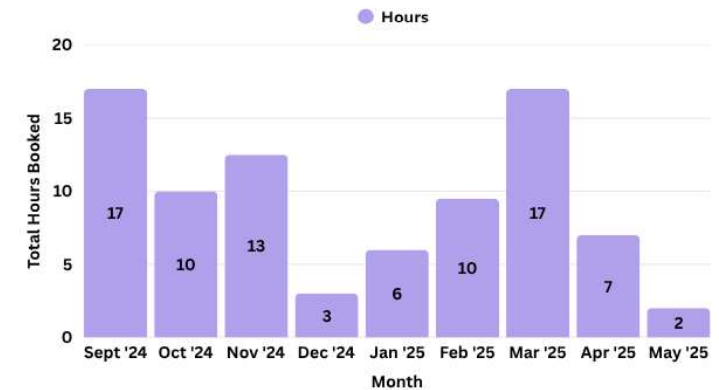**Total hours of room usage:** 307.5 hours

300+
students have used the Virtual Reality space

This data is from the from the 2024/25 academic year

VR Space at Glance

20
Bookings of the VR Space

84
Hours booked in the VR space

4
Hours average session duration in the VR Spaace

Monthly VR Suite Usage

Hours

(Bar chart: Total Hours Booked vs Month)
- Sept '24: 17
- Oct '24: 10
- Nov '24: 13
- Dec '24: 3
- Jan '25: 6
- Feb '25: 10
- Mar '25: 17
- Apr '25: 7
- May '25: 2

The **Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health** leads in the adoption of the VR space, primarily for applications in **Medicine and Pharmacy.**

Hyflex

Key Findings

Flexibility and Collaboration
The Hyflex room was highly praised for its *flexible layout*, *multiple screens*, and *adaptable furniture*, which made it easier for students to work in groups and for teachers to conduct breakout sessions. The "informal feel" of the space was noted to encourage students to ask questions and participate more, **fostering better collaboration**.

Positive Impact on Hybrid Learning
The space is considered *a significant improvement over traditional rooms* for hybrid teaching, offering a more professional and well-designed environment. The technology, when working correctly, *removes geographical barriers* and allows for increased participation from international students and guest speakers. This flexibility in attendance was seen to significantly **enhance the quality of learning** by facilitating cross-continental knowledge sharing and boosting attendance rates.

Environmental and Aesthetic Strengths
The *physical environment was a major strength*, with participants describing the spaces as **"clean, fresh, and modern"**. This aesthetic was noted to have a positive "psychological impact", making the spaces feel more inclusive, student-centered, and pride-inducing for those using them.

Strengths

Flexibility & Adaptability: The space's layout and adaptable furniture make it ideal for group work and breakouts. Movable furniture and multiple screens allow seamless transitions between activities.

Aesthetics & Environment: The room contemporary design and the environment has a positive "underlying psychological impact". It's seen as a "caring" and "inclusive" space that makes students feel more comfortable and engaged compared to traditional lecture rooms.

Technology & Functionality: The multiple screens with wireless connectivity, and its design is built around hybrid teaching. Enables cross-border communication and supports blended learning models.

Supporting Innovation: Encourages experimentation with new teaching tools and formats. It also helps academics explore creative approaches

Accessibility: Being on the ground floor, makes it easily accessible. The layout is also inclusive, and the multiple screens cater to accessibility needs.

"It's such a lovely, bright space, it feels very open, planned it this you can tell that a lot of thought has gone into that"

"The flexibility encourages different styles of learning. Feels so much more natural to work in groups and breakouts which helps facilitate proactive and group learning."

Challenges

Technology Reliability
Solstice system issues: Lagging, freezing, and poor responsiveness during presentations caused stress for students and disrupted sessions.
Audio problems: Microphones sometimes created excessive bass or failed to capture voices clearly, especially in hybrid sessions.
Camera tracking limitations: Cameras didn't always follow speakers effectively, making remote participation harder.

Hybrid Delivery Complexity
Academics found it challenging to manage hybrid sessions, especially when balancing in-person and remote engagement. The advanced technology created a barrier for new or occasional users. Concerns about recording policies and student discomfort with being recorded.

Awareness and Promotion
Some staff felt that information about the spaces wasn't widely shared, leading to underutilisation or siloed use. There is also a concern that the room might simply become another generic teaching space if not managed well, negating its specialised purpose.

VR Suite

Key Findings

Providing safety, comfort and Privacy

The individual, *soundproof pods are a major strength*, providing a safe and private space for students to practice and learn without feeling judged or distracted. This environment helps students, especially those worried about speaking to others or those who are neurodiverse, to **build confidence** and **focus more deeply on the session**.

Enhancing Learning while Meeting Curriculum Needs

The VR space allows students to **learn at their own pace** and offers the opportunity for repetition, which they would not get in a traditional setting. This is particularly *valuable for courses that require practical application* of skills, such as clinical simulations for speech therapy, and helps the university meet governing body standards when clinical placements are limited.

Driving Efficiency & Innovation

The dedicated space and technology helps **reduce the academic's workload** when it comes to assessments. The space makes it easier to use new technology and *run unique workshops, driving innovation* in teaching practices. The ease of booking and on-site technical support were also highlighted as major benefits.

Strengths

Privacy and Safety: Individual pods are a key strength, providing a soundproof, safe, and comfortable space for students. This privacy helps students feel more at ease, especially our neurodiverse learners with sensory sensitivities. The health and safety features, such as padding to protect equipment if it falls, were also highlighted.

Immersive Learning Experience: The VR simulations allow students to engage deeply with scenarios like patient consultations or clinical decision-making. Students can repeat sessions, pause, and learn at their own pace — supporting self-directed learning.

Dedicated and Organised Space: The VR room is a dedicated space for VR equipment, which is seen as a huge benefit compared to adapting an existing space.

Efficiency and Innovation: The use of VR reduces academic workload and costs (e.g., by not needing to hire actors for simulations). The space also makes it easier to use new technology and hold unique workshops, helping academics "stretch and flex" their teaching skills.

Positive Environment: The room is described as inviting and comfortable, with good lighting and WiFi, which contributes to a positive learning atmosphere. The ease of booking and on-site technical support were also noted as major benefits.

Accessibility: Pods are wheelchair accessible and designed to accommodate diverse needs. While the lighting and soundproofing tailored to support neurodivergent students. This level of Digital accessibility features enhances usability.

Challenges

Capacity and Logistics: The limited number of pods (only 8 at a time) is a key challenge, especially when trying to accommodate large groups of 50-60 students. This also leads to a lack of sufficient waiting space. The pods could benefit from more chairs that are easily removable.

Environmental and Comfort Issues: Users noted that the VR rooms can get too warm, especially during busy sessions, and the headsets can become sweaty. Also, headsets were found to be uncomfortable for glasses wearers – which is an accessibility concern.

Usability and Information: The space can be difficult to use for those who are not tech-savvy. There's a perceived need for better promotion and information about the space on staff platforms, as people are currently working in silos.

Technical and Management Issues: Technical support is almost essential in this space for most users. There is a suggestion that the university needs to better manage all the VR equipment across campus to get better value for money. At the moment there are many VR headsets and not enough safe space to use them

> *"Students all left asking when they can use the space again!"*

Intended Purpose

The Tech Free space was intended to be used as a versatile space for group discussions and hybrid learning, where students can also unwind between classes.
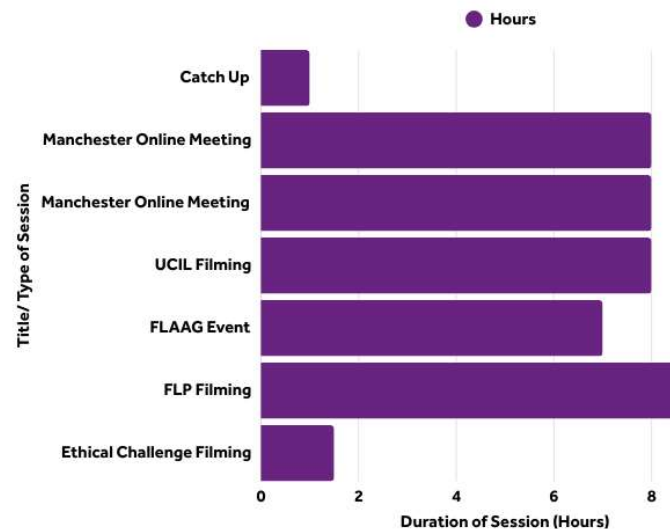
Strengths

Type of space: The concept of a "tech-free" space is a valuable and welcomed alternative to traditional learning environments.

Informal and Safe Environment: It provides a safe and informal space for people to gather, have down time, and engage in free-flowing conversations. This environment helps to engage students outside of a typical teaching setting and is great for informal chats.

Environment & Aesthetics: The 'look' and 'feel' of the space contributes to a positive aesthetic ideal for filming. It has also been found that it is quite with ideal nature lighting making it perfect for video content.

Location: The space is located within a building that is easily accessible.

Tech Free Space Usage

● Hours

Title/ Type of Session	Duration of Session (Hours)
Catch Up	
Manchester Online Meeting	
Manchester Online Meeting	
UCIL Filming	
FLAAG Event	
FLP Filming	
Ethical Challenge Filming	

(x-axis: 0, 2, 4, 6, 8 — Duration of Session (Hours))

Tech Free Space Overview

43% — Bookings were for filming

6 — Hours average booking time

42.5 — Hours book in total during the 24/25 academic year

Our **Tech-Free Space** has only seen 7 bookings, indicating **underutilisation**. Yet, the majority of booking were for filming demonstrate its adaptability for a range of activities beyond its primary design

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Student Workshops

The Flexible Learning Spaces from a student perspective

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Student Voices on Flexiable Learning Spaces

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Key Findings

Increased Engagement and Psychological Safety

The primary strength of the of the learning spaces is their ability to deliver a **learning experience** that students perceive as **revolutionary and inherently valuable**. The VR room creates a crucial environment of **psychological safety**. This risk-free environment boosts confidence and participation far above traditional settings!

Transformative Learning with a High Value Proposition

The spaces successfully move beyond traditional learning methods to provide **experiences that** students view as **indispensable and career-enhancing**. The VR room, in particular, is seen as offering value difficult to replicate elsewhere. The spaces are effectively **closing the gap between theory and practical** application.

Operational Friction Is A Barrier To Use

Despite the high value, students are consistently blocked by logistical hurdles, resulting in the lower satisfaction scores and inhibiting repeated use. The **technology (VR Headsets) is not accessible enough** for self-service, however guides and resources can overcome this barrier.

Strengths

Realistic simulations in the VR Room provide immediate feedback and support clinical skill development.

Safe and private environments help students feel comfortable making mistakes and reflecting on their learning.

Inclusive Hyflex design enables seamless interaction between on-campus and remote learners.

Engaging and well-designed spaces promote active learning and student participation.

Autonomy and control allow students to learn at their own pace and revisit content when needed.

Theory-to-practice connection is strengthened through immersive and applied learning experiences.

ALL
student participants would recommend the Flexible Learning Spaces to their peers

67%
of students said the **VR Room** made them feel more confident and comfortable making mistakes

Challenges

Noise pollution in VR booths disrupted focus and reduced immersion.

Limited access to spaces due to course design and simulation availability.

Lack of clear instructions before and during VR sessions.

Uncertainty about session logistics, such as breaks and duration.

Booths not fully sealed, causing sensory distractions and reduced concentration.

> The VR room is genuinely revolutionary... it makes the material come alive, a truly immersive learning experience

> It was realistic but without the fear of it being real life so I felt more comfortable.
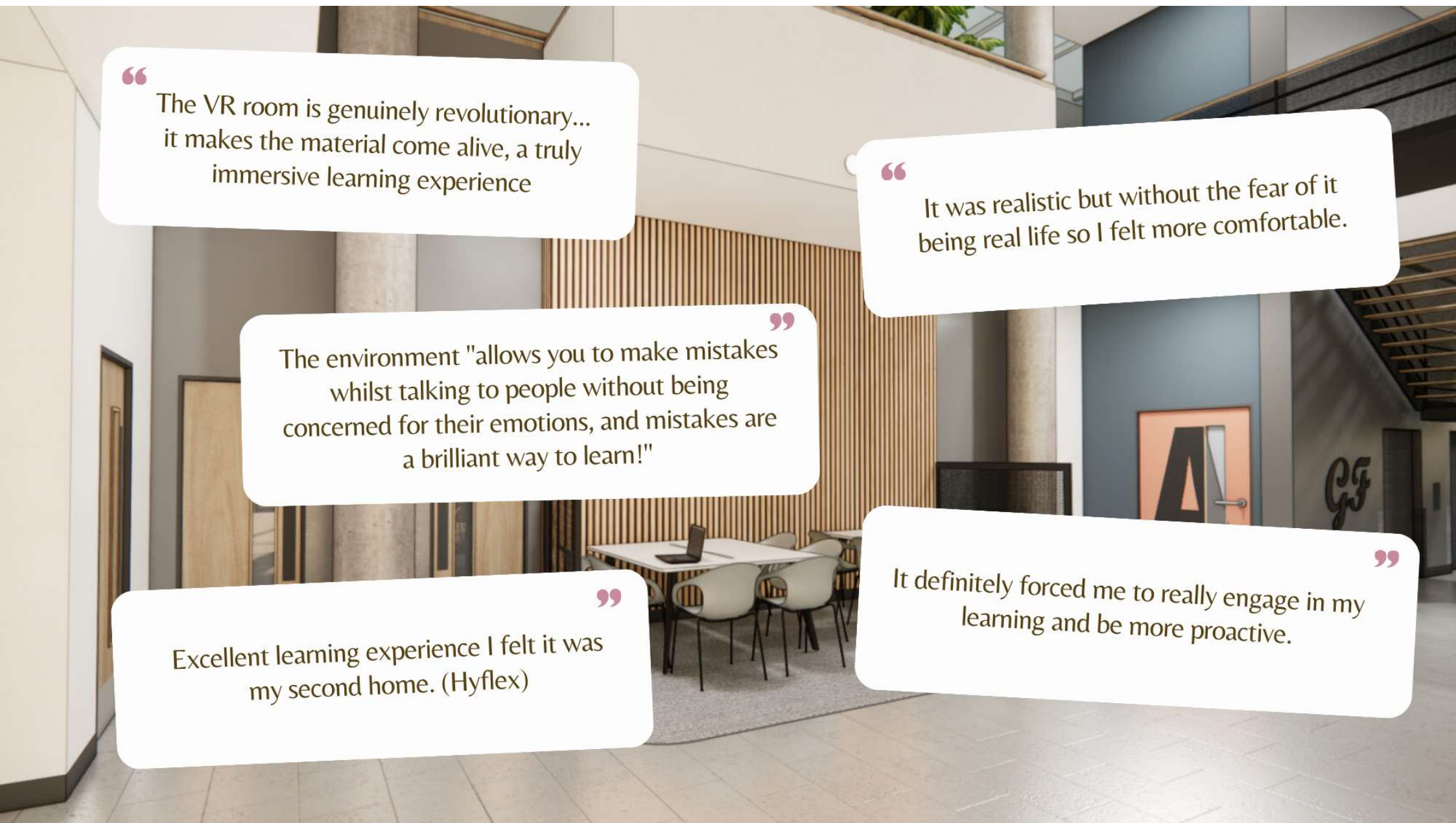
> The environment "allows you to make mistakes whilst talking to people without being concerned for their emotions, and mistakes are a brilliant way to learn!"

> Excellent learning experience I felt it was my second home. (Hyflex)

> It definitely forced me to really engage in my learning and be more proactive.

Recommendations & Quick Wins

The recommendations made for the Flexible Learning spaces based on the feedback from teaching staff and students.

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Recommendations

1. **Centralise VR Kit Management**: Implement a multi-device platform like ManageXR to streamline software updates and maintenance across campus.

2. **Provide Proactive User Guidance**: Share clear written instructions and FAQs for VR and Hyflex technology before sessions.

3. **Ensure Technology Reliability**: Regularly review and maintain equipment, resolving known issues especially after peak usage periods.

4. **Internalise VR Tech Support**: Develop an internal support strategy with Media Services to reduce reliance on external providers.

5. **Improve Noise Control in VR**: Address booth design flaws and introduce noise-cancelling features to reduce distractions.

6. **Upgrade Seating Ergonomics**: Provide more comfortable and flexible seating in Hyflex rooms for longer sessions.

7. **Enhance Access and Flow**: Improve door accessibility and create waiting areas near VR rooms for smoother student rotations.

8. **Formalise Scheduling Strategy**: Enable coordinated booking of multiple spaces to support hybrid and breakout-style sessions.

9. **Increase Student Access**: Simplify booking and allow more frequent student use of VR spaces to reinforce learning.

10. **Boost Promotion and Training**: Launch targeted campaigns and offer staff training to increase awareness and innovative use.

11. **Plan for Space Expansion**: Invest in more VR pods and Hyflex rooms with varied capacities to meet growing demand.

12. **Diversify VR Content**: Support tools that help trainers create varied scenarios to benefit a broader range of courses.

13. **Integrate into University Strategy**: Embed flexible learning spaces into the university's teaching strategy as a progressive model

Quick Wins

Proactive Digital Guidance

The most frequent complaint was lack of clarity before using the spaces. Creating a single, simple FAQ/Instructional Sheet or SharePoint page for each space id low cost and high impact.

Targeted Off-Peak Promotion

The spaces are underutilised, particularly on Fridays and during non-term time. Launching a simple internal communications campaign (e.g., targeted emails, StaffNet announcement) promoting off-peak slots in the Hyflex and Tech-Free rooms for staff meetings, training, and non-academic activities.

Modify or Upgrade Hyflex Furnishings

The physical discomfort is undermining student motivation to use the room for extended periods. It will also impact student with an accessibility issues. Ergonomic, comfortable and movable seating to accommodate all workshop styles and lengths. There also needs to be a consideration for sockets central to tables to avoid the use of extensions that can be a hazard!

Schedule Equipment Maintenance

Academics and staff noted that equipment maintenance tends to slip, especially after peak periods. Formalise a regular maintenance review through centralised university processes ensuring cameras, microphones, cables, and headset lenses are cleaned, updated, and functional before the start of the next term