

Edge Feedback Session Minutes 07/11/2018

1. Introduction

Kimberley Pickett (SU Activities Officer) introduced the meeting as a time to go through all the changes currently occurring or proposed within the Edge, and hear answers from Jamie Eastman (Director of Arts - The Edge) regarding questions students had about the changes. This was also a time for Jamie to hear feedback and concerns from the students. The goal was to clarify what students can expect to see happen in the Edge in the coming months and how it will impact the students.

Kim also explained the process for how the meeting would run. Pre-submitted questions were collated by Kim, combined where there was overlap and removed where there was an irrelevance to the meeting at hand (this was 3 questions).

2. Context of Changes

Why did the Edge make these changes?

Jamie explained that in part these changes sought to put him in charge of the Edge, hoping this means that the Edge can be more top to bottom about the arts and the running of the Edge in the longer term, taking some control from Hospitality (although they will still run the cafe) and giving the university more of an “office for the arts” with the Edge within its portfolio. This gives Jamie a much broader oversight to deliver on various areas, which will be facilitated by the staff restructure. Jamie also envisions that this will mean that the Edge can do more alongside students and create opportunities for positive development within the Edge.

The university are also looking at ways to be more cost effective and ensure that the Edge can balance the books by running in a more efficient way and creating some cost savings.

Jamie also noted that many of the changes are still only proposed, and go from ideas to more concrete areas which they feel passionate about the need to implement. While the Edge may not have got off on a great foot in the way that they have talked about incoming changes, Jamie is highly optimistic and very interested in hearing student feedback which can then better shape these plans.

Did the Edge liaise at all with the SU and how?

The short answer is no, especially in regards to the staff restructure. The university largely has processes in place when it comes to staff reorganisation and clear ideas about operation. Jamie does believe it would have been good to consider further who would be impacted, not just the staff but also the student population and it would have been good to involve the SU in that process. It would have aided transparency if the SU had been at the table.

However, some of the restructure was tied to issues of confidentiality in regards to the staff. Other than the staff side of things, everything else can be discussed in terms of how the SU and the Edge

can work more closely together moving forward. The SU and the Edge need to realign and get back to a good quality of relationship, and there are lots of students who can contribute moving forward.

Kim added that she found the fact that the SU were not liaised with from the get go which was extremely concerning, as we are major stakeholders of the building. The Edge should have gotten more involved with students, and the fact that the changes occurred over the summer certainly hindered this as well.

What plans are in place to consult with ongoing changes within the Edge?

The first thing is to get the relationship with the Edge and the SU back on track. That drop-off has happened because much of the staff the SU and societies had been speaking to previously were suddenly in a reorganisation situation, which is so process heavy as to make it difficult to carry on business as usual. Now that reorganisation is at a point where regular meetings can happen again and the Edge is in a better position to receive feedback on the process.

The Edge would very much like to be led by the SU and in how they solicit feedback and where changes can happen to benefit students. Staff such as Eloise are eager to have direct relationships with societies and users of the space. The Edge are now moving from speculative changes to more concrete solutions around room access, room bookings and how spaces work in that sense. Edge have set up some forums which will start from next Wednesdays for a few Wednesdays in succession to talk about some things (room access, for example). The Edge can start to be more guided by students in the direction changes take.

3. Ticketing and Website

Will the Edge advertise societies events on their website even though they don't sell tickets?

Jamie sees no reason that the Edge couldn't generally signpost to where tickets are being sold, but in short won't advertise events as they have done previously because they are no longer connected to the Edge ticketing system.

Jamie believes this will create a lot of confusion for the public as to where they should go to get the things that they have come to the website to get. The SU is always welcome to bring ticketing back to create a clearer single-channel problem of communication.

Kim asked whether it wasn't in the Edge's best interest to signpost student activity in the Edge to increase footfall. Jamie responded there seemed to be little reason for this due to confusion over advertising, as he hasn't seen anywhere advertise tickets they do not sell. Ultimately, the Edge is a public-facing space, and the current ticketing situation is a disaster, not only because of the current teething problems but also because ideally everything should be in one place.

Natalie (BUST) commented that the lack of Edge pages creates confusion as people can't find where to buy tickets for shows at the Edge and Lydia (BUST) adds that the current system looks unprofessional. Jamie responded that he didn't see the issue of professionalism as a priority, but that has noted the feedback. He also added that it wasn't worth the amount of time it took for

someone from the Edge to put together a page every time for tickets they aren't selling, especially as this means in total twice the time is being put in between the SU and the Edge website pages.

Beth (Gravity Vomit) asked how this would affect shows linked more closely with the Edge, for example by receiving Edge Arts funding. Jamie agrees this is the sort of thing that needs to be elaborated, and that a process, such as a flowchart, needs to be put in place to evaluate different situations. Jamie also noted that he believes the wider aim should be to look forward to a point where the Edge is the best place for student arts and music in the country. This would involve students, staff and a structure for support and grants.

Why are students at the bottom of the website? This clearly show they are not a priority in the Edge.

That website is new and can always be adapted and updated. Jamie would envisage that the location is not an indication of priorities and allows people to access the space within one or two clicks. This issue is more to do with content and what would exist on that page. This would be shows and ticketing were it not for the ticketing change. It is a priority that the website remains clean, tidy, and makes sense for people using it.

Why charge students for tickets, when the Edge is for students?

It was clarified this was in regards to a possible per ticket booking fee being implemented.

Jamie responded that for student shows, it isn't just students that attend. Booking fees are a standard for many theatres and help to pass the cost around, as the software and admin are expensive. It would be great to see a booking fee being charged for non-student tickets. The current system may not be able to separate that fee from the student tickets but this would mean that students aren't being charged more.

Jamie added that this could have been a conversation to have with the SU, but they were never able to as the SU simply chose to take ticketing away from the Edge.

Are there currently plans to charge for Spectrix (the Edge's ticketing system) and is there a concrete figure?

There isn't a concrete figure for this at the moment, but the Edge are interested in exploring that change, though it is worth discussion if a per event charge for societies is a deal breaker. If there is a booking fee on tickets the Edge could look at a solution that would not charge societies.

Jamie suggests it may be useful for societies to have a look at the Edge finances in question to have a better idea of the costs involved for the Edge and to facilitate a more in-depth discussion.

4. Room Allocation

Are there any plans to reinstate the instrument store room on level 2 (currently storing tables for the Ensemble Room)?

This is the sort of thing the Edge would like to talk about with students. There is always opportunity to find better uses for space and to put more arts content into every space. That said, tables need

to go somewhere. One of the great shames in the Edge is that every space was clearly designed for arts activities, and it is disappointing those aren't happening all the time.

Does the Edge see itself as a student arts facility or a corporate center primarily? How does this affect how the arts spaces are utilised?

Jamie is very interested in arts activities, but he has to consider these alongside the need to balance the budgets. The ideal would be to find a way to have conferences and similar activities to go on outside of term time, with the space acting almost exclusively as a student arts space in term-time.

Angel (BTS) asked where the balance might fall between student arts and professional arts. Jamie responded that there could perhaps be a future where this all ties into student work, perhaps through collaboration with professional. This could include mentorship schemes or more professional avenues and opportunities for graduates and postgraduates. He would like to see more things at the Edge connected to the research and teaching side of the organisation, not just external organisations coming into the space.

Annayah (BUST) added that lots of students are trying to work at a professional level but feel unsupported and inhibited by Edge actions.

Kimberley (SU) mentioned the Student Excellence Schedule which has been discussed for over a year now, which would be something for all students looking to have more mentoring, advice and contacts with the professional arts agenda.

One of the proposed ideas is to have rooms freely accessible after 6pm? How will instrument safety is guaranteed?

This won't happen. How the students will get room access is one of the things to look at in the workshops which will be held by the Edge in the next few weeks.

Access slots for instruments don't work, especially for larger pieces of equipment which are too large to carry around all day, are there any ideas for bettering it for student needs?

One solution would be to have these in store rooms or lockers not in rooms. Lockers are however very expensive so this may be a difficult change.

Claire (ChaOS) pointed out that this was exactly what happened with the store room which is currently full of tables. Could tables and instrument space not be swapped? Jamie is very up for exploring how each room is used, especially if they have to be changed around less often due to there being fewer conferences during term-time. However, many of the ways rooms are being utilised were established for a reason.

Jamie would be happy to see rooms being used for nothing other than arts activities, even if that means occasionally remaining empty. However, in the current situation there would be questions around why there isn't anything going on in those rooms.

Will students still take priority with room bookings?

Jamie would like to implement this, but there are other stakeholders to consider and this will need to be worked on. Currently, there is a very good system in place with the advance booking system giving students priority.

What is the long-term plan regarding pianos?

There are no plans to get rid of pianos, but the location of each piano is examined to enable the most overall benefit out of pianos. The Steinway would ideally be used more, with increased priority given to its maintenance.

5. Box Office

The box office is very well used for general enquiries and access, how will the Edge cover this within their vision?

Jamie would like there to always be a presence in the foyer, and would like a more welcoming scenario where people can be greeted as they walk into the Edge and can be a first port of call for information around access ticketing and general enquiries. The current box office is not necessarily visible when walking in.

Claire (BTS) asked how this would allow for the provision of physical necessities such as the hearing loop or lost and found. Jamie responded that these technical needs will still need to be provided for, though concrete plans have not yet been made.

Lydia (BUST) asked how the shortened hours would work in terms of access. These could be addressed with a more digital system. Ticketing, access, and information need to be looked at separately, as most box offices don't deal with room access and this is the current reason for a need for such long box office hours. Jamie envisages room booking could happen through the University system, though this is still being worked on. The student side of access is very evening and weekend based so would need to find a way to make this process very smooth, with potential online access so students don't have to come into the Edge to book.

Angel (BTS) asked whether the timescale for introducing this is still the start of the next semester. Jamie responded that this was the goal, but they are running late on this. They will still be able to get the staff to keep the box office running. While this wouldn't be able to keep that going forever that's not disappeared. If the Edge can get to a place where they can separate room access from the rest of the box office, this would be making significant strides. Jamie acknowledged there may still be teething problems with this changeover.

The box office is currently the strongest point for information in the Edge, with friendly staff. How will that quality of service be replaced?

The absence of a friendly face to help with room allocation issues may be a point for further discussion. While Jamie recognised this was a good thing, he also pointed out this was not an efficient system for room allocations to have someone sat there to deal with room access. If we get to a place where there is no good alternative the Edge could reevaluate.

Currently there are issues of clashes and errors happening regularly. This could be solved with an improved online system which showed availability accurately. Just like sport have where you can see if a space is free and book it.

Does the Edge actually think students want a sushi bar?

Clearly not, judging by the student reaction. However, one of the major stakeholders in The Edge is the cafe, which needs to make money. Jamie is trying to work with all peers within the university, and the sushi bar could help the cafe do well by providing another source of income. At the moment, the cafe makes a lot of money from doing catering for events in the foyer or conferences. If the Edge is to be used more for student activities over corporate, that source of income needs to be compensated for.

Kim asks whether the sushi bar couldn't be implemented as part of the cafe. Jamie responds that this may be possible, but that he also envisions the sale of drinks in this space, as it's more visible than the cafe to people walking out of the theatre.

Angel (BTS) added that the objection wasn't necessarily the use of the space for food, just sushi as this sort of food may be incongruous with what the students want. Jamie believes this is worth exploring, and queries what students think of the current cafe provision. The overwhelming response is "good but expensive".

Hannah (BUSMS) mentioned that the bar has made money during performances, for example when it was open at Urinetown. Jamie acknowledged that this may be true, but the cafe need to be willing to take on that risk and get engaged in selling during performances.

Other points brought up included concerns as to whether the sushi bar would make money if the cafe isn't, as well as concerns over possible clashes over a bar in the box office space where people are already trying to leave the theatre and queue for the toilets in the same space.

6. Ushers and Show Times

Why are the Edge thinking of charging for ushers, when this is a fundamental from the Edge's perspective?

There are no plans to charge for ushers, however Kim (SU) did express that Jamie did mention this and showed him the minutes from a meeting which stated that this would be looked at for 19/20. The idea that the Edge are doing this may have come from discussion around the change in start times which came about from shows overrunning. As this has caused welfare issues for cast and crew, students could be charge for ushers if they run past 10pm and need to pay for extra time. This would largely be to provide a disincentive for societies to run past that time. Jamie doesn't want to charge students for this but needs to keep things sensible for ushers and duty managers.

Could the Edge train society members to be ushers so that societies can avoid being charged?

No, due to health and safety concerns. The new ticketing system has also been very badly implemented, which does not inspire confidence in societies' ability to do this kind of activity.

In addition, it is also important to have a duty manager in place. There is a benefit to there being a member of staff who is separated from students with some amount of oversight.

Is there a possibility to move back to the 7.30pm start times even with the current uncertainty around ushers?

Jamie responded that it would be nice to stay that way for the moment given current changes happening.

Angel (BTS) also noted that the majority of shows overrunning come from audience hanging around in the foyer for a long time after the show, not the shows themselves.

Claire (BTS) pointed out this is causing real welfare issues for students missing meals or lectures, especially for Backstage who do shows on a weekly basis. Backstage could also help facilitate getting the audience out quicker with announcements or brighter house lights.

Polly Hawker (SU) suggested that the students should be given a chance to prove themselves with a trial period at the 7.30pm start time. Jamie agreed to this

The first show which is likely to be able to implement this due to publicity is A Midsummer Night's Dream. The SU will facilitate a discussion between BTS and other societies as to how they can facilitate the show finishing on time and the audience leaving promptly.

7. Tech Support and H&S

How are Backstage being supported and how have they been affected by the staff shortage?

The staff shortage is an interim situation due to the transition period between roles, which will start to be filled shortly.

Claire (BTS) agreed with this and clarified that for Backstage, the greater concern was the amount of theatre maintenance that we are taking on, the lack of budget for maintenance and repair and the fact that larger necessary fixes (e.g. stage, fire doors) are not being dealt with.

Jamie was very interested to hear this and would be happy to have a further chat about maintenance needs and how much Backstage is currently taking on.

How can the Edge ensure that there is staff in place which is properly qualified, especially in regards to approving risk assessments for more complex areas such as rigging?

This should come in with the new lead technician role, which will bring in a qualified person to head up technical areas who will have appropriate experience and qualifications. The Edge specified that they had had some decent applications but are very aware that they need to bring in someone who will suit the role and be up to scratch.

Angel (BTS) pointed out that given the combining of galleries and technical theatre roles, as well as the drop in pay grade, it may be unrealistic to find someone with the appropriate skills.

Why are the fire doors still broken over three years after the problem was first flagged?

Jamie acknowledged this was disappointing and showed the long-term building maintenance issues, and thanked us for flagging this.

Any queries about this summary or about further details of the meeting, email suactivities@bath.ac.uk