‘Spacefinder’ – Executive Summary

Spacefinder arose from ethnographic research conducted with undergraduate students at the University of Cambridge that revealed that students were often failing to find study spaces to suit their needs, and that study preferences differed dramatically between individuals and changed regularly depending on the work being undertaken. The idea behind Spacefinder was that of a service that might show students where study spaces were relative to their current location, whilst also detailing the attributes of these spaces and their suitability for different activities and preferences.

Initial prototyping
Co-design workshops with students and library staff fed into a very basic Spacefinder wireframe prototype that demonstrated potential features and layouts. An overwhelmingly positive student reaction to the prototype informed the subsequent creation of a responsibly designed UI.

Pilot phase
After an intensive period during which the spaces that would appear in the service (which included the city’s cafes and bars as well as libraries) were described, indexed and photographed, Spacefinder was launched in October 2015 as a ‘minimum viable product’ having just enough features for it to be deployed ahead of further iterations to improve functionality and content. The service received rave reviews from Cambridge’s student population and was heavily used throughout the first term of the academic year. The Spacefinder project team continued to add new spaces and update existing entries ahead of the launch of an improved Version 2 launched in Easter Term 2016, with added filters listing disability access information and other searchable options such as bicycle racks and gender neutral toilets. Usability testing with students also led to the removal of a search box and the increased site real estate for the photographs of the services’ 200 spaces.

Usage statistics and feedback
• Over 13,000 sessions were conducted on the pilot service since its launch.
• Surprisingly for a product expected to be used ‘on the go’ 66% of website visits were from desktop computers rather than mobile devices.
• 38% of visitors returned to Spacefinder after using it for the first time.
• 14% of visits to the website were from countries outside the UK.

Key learning outcomes
• Library services/products that recognise a wider landscape of learning and experience extending beyond our physical buildings are very highly valued.
• Minimum viable products offer incredibly quick buy-in without the cost of lengthy development time. Had we tried to design a more complete Spacefinder we might not have released it yet.
• Students have very individual needs when it comes to work spaces and we need to ensure that our services recognise this and provide a choice of environments.
• Only by exploring and researching behaviour and experience can we develop products and services that are truly valuable to our users. Students would never have told us that they needed a space finding tool, but this project clearly proved that they did.

The full report can be read here: http://bit.ly/thespacefinderreport